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Oral history interview with Michael C.
McMillen, 1997 Apr. 15-Dec. 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael C. McMillen on April 15, August 19 and December 8, 1997. The interview was conducted at Michael C. McMillen's home in Santa Monica, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funded by the Pasadena Art Alliance Transcribing Project.

Interview

MM: MICHAEL Mc MILLEN

PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

[BEGIN SESSION #1, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, the first session of an interview with artist Michael C. Mc Millen. The interview is taking place in Michael C. Mc Millen's home in Santa Monica, California, on April 15, 1997. This is the first session, Tape 1, Side A, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is where you live. As a matter of fact, if I'm not mistaken, you actually grew up in this very house. You were born in Santa Monica? Would you just fill in the background?

MM: I was born in Echo Park, Queen of Angels Hospital, in East L.A. My folks moved to Santa Monica in the forties, and I grew up basically in this house, which is on Princeton Street. So we're talking about the place and how it affects my work?

PK: Before we move to that, could you tell me just a little bit about your family. What kind of an environment it was for you growing up here? Is there any family interest or encouragement in the way of art? What did your dad do for a living? What were you exposed to here?

MM: Well, let me roll it back to the previous generation. My father was born in Huntington, West Virginia, and had aspirations of a career in the theater. So we went to New York City after he graduated from college in the thirties. He acted in off-Broadway shows and worked at Macy's selling art supplies, garden supplies and whatever else aspiring actors do, during the Depression. He met my mother at a "rent" party in a Village [Greenwich Village].

PK: What kind of a party?

MM: A "rent" party. At that time, if you had a hard time meeting your rent, your friends would have a party and charge a dollar or 50 cents or something and you scraped together enough money to pay the rent. This friend of my father's introduced him to my mother. My mother -- she wasn't my mother at the time -- and her name was lone De la Sol. She was born in Naples [Italy] in 1914. My grandparents and she immigrated to the [United] States, probably in 1923, settling in Brooklyn of all places. She actually went to Pratt [Institute in Brooklyn], and studied commercial art. Then she worked as a window dresser in New York City. They hit it off, and, in fact, my dad said that they'd been dating for a couple of months before he realized that she had two kids. I have two older brothers, half-brothers. Anyhow, to make a long story short, they were living in a walk-up on McDougall Street in the Village. According to my Dad, after one too many cold winters there with a broken furnace in the building, they bought bus tickets and came out to California. Dad wanted to pursue a career in the movies.

PK: What year was that?

MM: It was before I was born, so it was probably in the mid-to-late forties. I know travel restrictions were kind of difficult during the war, so I'm not sure exactly.

PK: But before you were born, and you were born in '46?

MM: '46, so probably '44 or '45 that they came to California.

PK: Did they have any connections at all out here?

MM: No, none. It was the attraction of warmth. And "Go West, Young Man" as Horace Greeley advised. Eventually, both sets of grandparents followed them to California, all to Santa Monica. The whole family emigrated, basically, westward. My folks divorced when I was about one or two years old and I was given over to my father's parents to raise me. They raised me here in this house.

PK: So this was your grandparents' place?

MM: Yes. When they came out here, they bought this place.

PK: So you didn't know your mother much?

MM: Not in the maternal sense. I knew her better as an adult, but my grandmother was really my mother in that sense. And my mother was a real interesting character. I remember twice a year, this exotic-looking lady in a Cadillac would pull up with a mink coat, red nail polish, and a cigarette holder. I'd get into this car and go off with her. It was once at Christmas and once on my birthday. I hardly ever saw her.

PK: But she lived nearby?

MM: She lived either in Santa Monica or over in Cheviot Hills. She started an interior design business and was quite successful. I would sometimes go with her to clients' houses for visits. So it was a very exotic world that I was exposed to because my grandparents are very simple folks. They didn't have a lot of fancy things.

PK: Cadillacs?

MM: No, no, Packards, old Packards. It was a dual aspect of growing up here, being raised by parents who were basically from the nineteenth century. My grandfather had had a career in the Army. He was an officer and loved history. I remember this old gentleman always reading history books in the afternoons and talking about history to me. All their friends were at least up in their seventies or eighties when I was growing up, so I was very used to old people, and I had a lot of time by myself.

PK: Did that make you older than your years, do you think?

MM: I don't think so. I felt comfortable around old people. Because they were so much into their life and didn't have the energy that a younger parent would have, so they gave me a lot of slack. I had a lot of freedom. They trusted me, so I had a lot of time on my hands to play.

PK: What did you do with this time on your hands?

MM: There were a lot of kids that I would play with and I spent a lot of time drawing and creating these little fantasy worlds.

PK: Your grandparents weren't necessarily interested in art and that wasn't much of their world. So how did you come to your interest?

MM: My father was somewhat gifted that way. He was working as a scenic artist, eventually, and when I was a kid, he used to make me things like an anorexic Tyrannosaurus out of paper maché. I was used to seeing him make things out of nothing.

PK: Did he work for one of the studios?

MM: He worked for Channel 11 way before Metro Media owned it. It had numerous owners and he was there for 23 years. As a kid I would go up and visit him at the TV station when I'd stay over a weekend with him and his second wife. I got to visit his friends and his co-workers. I loved that. It was a very magical place because of the strange environments and installations, they called movie sets. It was fascinating. That duality between what you saw in person and what you saw on television are quite interesting contrasts.

PK: Is this retrospective, that observation on your part, or do you think even at that time, you were struck by that... It's not a paradox, but it's a dichotomy.

MM: I think on some level, it impressed me even then because I had behind-the-scenes glimpse of the way the illusions were created, and that, I thought, was quite fascinating. As I got older, I could certainly give more of a complex explanation to that phenomenon, but I think intuitively. It was interesting because it was a trick. It was an interesting kind of illusion.

PK: So almost like magician-ship or something?

MM: Yes, very similar to that. You could see the behind-the-stage craft of it. The idea also of being able to make it appear in reality was quite appealing because that's what kids do when they play; they create these realms of fantasy and work out whatever things they're exploring at the time. On top of that, a neighbor up the alley who was a very close friend, his wife was very good friends with my grandmother, his name was Kenneth Strickfaden. He's dead now, but he was quite a character, and what he's probably best known for is the creation of all of the electrical effects and machines that were seen in the first Frankenstein movie [1931].

After school, I'd walk down the alley and stop in his workshop and run [Nikola] Tesla coils for him. He was making

all this stuff in his garage. I thought that was so exciting that I wanted to become a scientist because I thought that was what science was. I didn't realize that was theater or to the extent of art.

PK: What was his name?

MM: His name was Kenneth Strickfaden.

PK: How do you spell that?

MM: S-T-R-I-C-K-F-A-D-D-E-N. I'm not sure if there are one or two Ds [Strickfaden]. I can look that up. He was a very interesting kind of a mentor to me because he tolerated, first of all, me in his workshop, not that I was obnoxious, but I was very happy to watch him do things. I think I learned a lot about the creative process outside of school that way, just watching him build things.

PK: Obviously, Frankenstein was some years earlier than this.

MM: 1932.

PK: So he continued this kind of employment for science fiction movies?

MM: Oh, yes, especially in the fifties which is the time we're talking about. He had a thriving business renting out his props to all kinds of B movies. I'm sure you've seen his stuff in almost every film made. So I'd frequently see a truck from Paramount or Columbia or Warner Brothers parked in the alley, loading these giant Tesla coils and insulators and other kinds of paraphernalia. I'd go and watch these guys manhandle this stuff and then move on to something else.

PK: Let me jump right into something that I just can't resist this because it's so parallel, so related to what you're describing, and this is a kind of crossover situation. Did you know, out on the faculty of Northridge [California State University], Irving Block?

MM: Yes.

PK: Did you know what his other career was?

MM: Wasn't he an art director at MGM?

PK: Well, I think he was at MGM, but I just learned this recently from Jill, his widow, he used to work on B movies. He was a mat artist.

MM: Oh, Forbidden Planet.

PK: Yes. He designed Robbie the Robot.

MM: Oh, I didn't realize that. Oh, excellent.

PK: I wondered if you had ever heard that because you were at Northridge. I just wondered if you had any classes with Irving or had any contact with him.

MM: I like him a lot, but I never had any classes with him. I always regretted not having had any classes with him, but I did have a number of classes with his good friend, Hans Burkhardt. Hans was terrific. Hans also worked at MGM. He and Irving were good friends. The movies then and to this day employ a lot of artists and it is a fascinating kind of duality. It was unique to Los Angeles that a lot of artists found support outside of the art world in commercial arts.

PK: You mentioned Hans, and you did take classes with him at Northridge. Did he teach life classes and so forth? Was that mostly what he did, or painting?

MM: He taught painting and drawing pretty much. I had a number of drawing classes with Hans and some painting classes as well. I remember we used to have a model and there was this one model, an older woman that's on the thin side and he called her "The Goat Woman." It wasn't in reference to how she looked, but apparently, she had a menagerie of goats that she loved like part of her family; and that was why he would refer to her as "The Goat Lady." But Hans was very passionate about his work and he would do demonstrations for us in drawing the figure as only he could do it, and although I was not destined to be an abstract painter, I think his enthusiasm and passion were very much a part of the class experience.

PK: Well, reinforcing already an inclination of yours that you were thinking of yourself in terms of fine art or seeing a possible career as a fine artist. Is that right?

MM: Oh, Hans?

PK: Well the experience of taking classes with Hans.

MM: No. That came later. I want to flashback now to about 1965. I enrolled my first year at Santa Monica [City] College going to summer school, taking math classes. I wanted to be a scientist, engineering, something in chemistry, probably, so I'm taking Chemistry, Physics, all of the basic stuff. Although I have grown up with my dad making scenery and such, and enjoying working with my hands and drawing, I don't really consider it as a career. I'm thinking that I want to be a scientist or an engineer. I was over at the school struggling through Calculus and doing miserably with German, and I had to take a class for non-art majors. It was a pre-requisite class, basic art class for non-art majors. I enjoyed it so much and it was such great contrast to the misery I was experiencing in Calculus. And being the hedonist that I am and I found I had a knack for it [art], I said, "Well, there's no question I'm going to change my major." The projects were interesting. I was able to do reasonably well with them and it caught my imagination, and I often realized at that time that what had fascinated me about those electrical machines that Strickfaden had built was that it was the theater of it more than the real physics of how many Gauss [Karl Friedrich Gauss] units are going across the flux field at a right angle.

PK: You didn't care about that.

MM: I didn't really care about that anymore. It was fun to know how to do it, but bottom line, it didn't matter. I wanted to see it. I wanted the physical experience of the event, so obviously I had to be an artist. As a kid, I wanted to be an inventor and realizing that being an artist is like being an inventor because you create problems for yourself and you solve them and you create things that weren't there before. That's awfully simplified, but that's how it is.

PK: So you changed art major at Santa Monica City College?

MM: I changed my major and then went back and started an art major there. Then I transferred out to Northridge.

PK: When was that?

MM: I was at [Santa Monica] City College from the summer of '64 until probably '66. I transferred to the State College. Then it was called San Fernando Valley State College. Now it's Cal State [California State University] Northridge. I was accepted there and to Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach] at the same time, so I got out my map of Los Angeles and took some calipers and I measured the distance on the map. My house was equidistant between the two of them. Then I thought about what time of day it was driving and the flow on the 405 [Interstate Highway 405], and I said, "Well, I'll go this way, because the traffic was going that way." And that's how I made it to Northridge.

PK: You mean you didn't even look to see who was teaching there or anything like that?

MM: I was still so naïve. I probably didn't know any better and I was being totally pragmatic. I'd never gone to an art museum before I got into college. I basically grew up with popular culture like Popular Mechanics and the movies and just being in Los Angeles in the fifties and sixties.

PK: At what point did you begin to think in terms of being a fine artist and this as an option or a goal for you, distinguishing between a fine artist and just making things?

MM: It was at City College. There was like a -- to use a funny word -- an epiphany. It happened like a snap of a finger. I just realized one night that's what I wanted do. I didn't think about a career. I didn't think about income. I just wanted to do it.

PK: How much did you know about what that actually involved?

MM: I was very naive. I knew nothing about it [art history]. I didn't have any art classes, history classes, until I got to Northridge. And, unfortunately, the one that I had was at 8 in the morning and the guy showed his dusty, old, black-and-white slides and stood in the back of the room talking in a monotone voice. It was a real struggle to stay awake, but I got through it. I really came to love art history once I went to Europe for the first time and started seeing all kinds of museums.

PK: Presumably that expanded your understanding of what being an artist could mean. Is that right? Did you see yourself then as possibly participating in this wonderful tradition?

MM: When you see it, it's like the closest thing to a time machine because these people are long gone, but they're talking to you over the gulf of time with their work that still exists, and the idea of it was very appealing, that there was a vehicle to express feelings and emotions and other things outside of, say, music or writing. I

knew the expressive power of art was very much an attractive aspect of it, especially in the early twenties. You have a lot of emotional turmoil and such and it's nice to have a vehicle to express that outside of self-destructive practices.

PK: When did you go to Europe?

MM: Actually, it was after I got out of college. It was probably 1978 maybe. It was late. I had gone to the County Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] before that year. I'd done New York my first time when I was 11 years old. In 1957, my dad took me back to New York to visit some of his old theater buddies and people he used to hang out with in the [Greenwich] Village, which is kind of an interesting group of people, actually. There were illustrators and writers and actors, and I was fascinated by that trip. I'd never been to a big city before.

PK: That's right, because nobody thinks of L.A. as a big city.

MM: Right. But come to think of it, we did go to the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. My dad took me to the Metropolitan Museum and I must correct myself, that was my first experience, and that did leave an impression on me, because I remember going into the armor rooms, and being fascinated by the suits of armor for the horses and the knights. We went in to the Egyptian display and I loved that.

PK: This must have been around 1957. Why the fascination with mummies, Egyptian, ancient civilization?

MM: 1957, I was 11 years old. There were a lot of movies at the time of Egyptian mummies and ancient civilizations.

PK: *The Mummy*?

MM: *The Mummy*, there is that, and there in the fifties, they made a lot of these epic films. They're kind of "camp" by today's standards, like *The Robe* and *The Pyramids*, *Land of the Pharaohs*, all those films. I think it was a blend of film culture and seeing things in a museum that was quite fascinating.

PK: So even at that point, you didn't draw a rigid line between these artifacts of the past and the entertainment, the fiction that then drew upon and built stories around.

MM: Not formally, it was part a continuum.

PK: You found that you had this enthusiasm, this fascination with the subjects and then the objects themselves that was served, maybe not equally, but served from both sources, from popular culture and then from the artifacts.

MM: Absolutely, yes. It was engaging, absolutely, totally. It was a very tempting idea to be able to create your own world and draw up in these other aspects. I remember once, some critic wrote that my work was too theatrical. This is in reference to an installation I'd done years ago, and although I think they may have meant it in a pejorative sense, I really took it as a compliment.

[END OF SESSION #1, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION #1, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: We're continuing an interview with Michael C. Mc Millen. This is the first session, Tape 1, Side B. Michael, you were talking about some of your first exposures to fine art or even the artifacts of ancient civilizations which seem to be attractive to you. And, not surprisingly, part of your enthusiasm grew out of some of the other sources for these kinds of interesting phenomena in movies at the time. You made the remark that early on [in your career] that some critic said your work was too theatrical.

MM: I think that was a paraphrase of what they had said in the review. I took that as a compliment, whereas, I think they meant it otherwise. But I've always maintained that art is like good theater. It somehow touches the viewer emotionally as well as intellectually -- at least the work that I responded to -- worked on those levels. Just to add again to that trip to New York when I was 11 years old, we were on top of the Empire State Building looking over the edge and, actually, I spotted *The Mayflower II* down in the East River from top of the building, and so we went down and visited it. Here's this reproduction of a historic ship, *The Mayflower* and modern New York existing at the same time. It was a funny kind of dislocation of time going on board this reproduction.

PK: So you got to go on it?

MM: Oh yeah. Somewhere I have little certificates that I got from that trip, a souvenir. And that's just another reinforcement of that blurring distinction between reality and fantasy because the ship was a fantasy. It was a reproduction, but it was a physical reality. Then we went to the Ripley Believe-It-Or-Not Museum. So there are a lot of bizarre kinds of high-art/low-art museum experiences. We went to Coney Island and saw these really

horrendous displays, like famous crime scenes. They're really tacky things, but that thing gave me nightmares for months afterwards.

PK: What was this place at Coney Island?

MM: There was this very popular kind of a carnival outside of New York [City]. You get to it by way of the subway at a place called Coney Island. They had a steeple chase, big slides, Ferris wheels, and stuff. Well, we were there in probably June of 1957, and even at that point in time, you could see it decaying. It was on the major skids, but my dad and I went there and did a lot of the rides and stuff, and that left a big impression on me. There was a quality you find in some of the Ray Bradbury stories that I felt the place had a kind of decadence, a rich kind of moldering decay that permeated the whole place. The place had tried at one time to be fun and its decay was very sad at the same time. It's sort of this funny duality to the experience of the place. It was thrilling and morbid at the same time. The laughing clowns weren't so funny. The House of Mirrors was kind of smudgy, dirty, and at one time, this was kind of grand place looking like some kind of a nightmare.

PK: You described these laughing clowns as not only "not so funny," but disturbing in a way. Does that remind you at all of some of Bruce Nauman's work?

MM: There's something about the clown, and I know a number of artists that have similar feelings. There's something disturbing about the clown. When I heard about that serial killer back East, "Kinko the Clown," who would dress up and they found all those murdered children under his floor. That just seemed to verify all my worse suspicions about clowns.

PK: But you were attracted in a strange way to this?

MM: Oh yes, and to make it parallel to Coney Island, out here growing up in Santa Monica, we have the Ocean Park Pier. It was a famous kind of amusement pier that was built up in the early part of the twentieth century. As a child, I'd go down there with my Cub Scout troop on a field trip and it was very much in the same state as Coney Island; the paint peeling and seedy characters hanging around. I remember as a child, my grandmother warning me not to go underneath the Santa Monica Pier because some kid had been murdered down there in the fifties. So there was this kind of attraction/repulsion that I had to these places. They were very attractive because of the mystery about them, and at the same time, they were terrifying. And so there was something about that love/hate relationship that's very attractive. I was fascinated by these slightly sinister places that had an edge to them.

PK: Do you see anything, specifically in your work that might draw from that kind of fascination, the attraction and repulsion at the same time; a sinister quality underneath the facade of something that's supposed to be entertainment?

MM: I think so. Let me flash back for a second. During the Renaissance, we would see in a theatre proscenium, they'd have these two masks one of comedy, one of tragedy; one mask smiling, one mask crying. I kind of see that in the work. Maybe at first glance, there might be kind of either a comedic or an engaging aspect to it, and then if you look again, there's something underneath that that's not always laughing, and it's sort of a metaphor for life.

PK: How would you see these qualities represented or realized that you're talking about? I mean is there anything specific? What about notions of decay, for instance?

MM: That's been a long interest of mine, not that I'm decaying especially, but the idea. One of the ongoing themes of my work of interest has been the idea of the inevitably of disintegration, of entropy, constant flux of matter, and so I've done a number of pieces that have explored those ideas, one of them being the architectural fragments.

PK: Like the piece over the couch there.

MM: Yes, that one.

PK: What is that called since people can't see it?

MM: It's called *Fin de Siecle*. It was done in 1992 and it's an abstracted portion of a piece of architecture, and it's basically a collage, a construction made up of a lot of found items, but it's put together in such a way that it looks like it's a fragment of a larger entity. At the same time you get a sense that it's a building that has long since past its prime. It's in decline, and yet in the decline, there's a lot of beauty; the shadows, the color is modulated and stained, the forms are juxtaposed. There's a formal beauty I see in the work, compositionally, and yet it's made up of very common elements that you really don't see. Most of the items were things I've either fabricated or I found and then brought together in a new relationship, which goes back to the idea of

disintegration in time. A lot of the things I use are things that I've basically found or rescued from oblivion, and I combine them into a new entity.

PK: Give a second chance, for them to function within an entity or a construction. Obviously, you look at that work and what strikes you in the beginning is your mind tries to identify what that could possibly be from because it looks like it must have had a function. It must represent something from our experience. In fact, it's a construction that once you examine it detail-by-detail is a composition.

MM: Exactly, yes. It's a formal composition. It's an integrated composition. When you start analyzing it piece by piece, it's irrational. There are parts that bear no direct relationship, but somehow it's brought together and you accept it as some kind of entity that has a rational function.

PK: So there's a tricksterism in this, in a sense. Is that part of what you're after?

MM: Basically, I call it like an open narrative in the sense that the viewers, in the act of looking and thinking about it, basically fill in the blanks themselves and the people can project their own story into the object, which I think is what I liked about making art is that the artist makes it to a certain point and then the viewer completes it by looking at the work and then commenting on it or not commenting on it. So in that sense, the objects have two identities. They are what they actually were manufactured, and then there's something else when they're in that context. I mean there are lots of scale contradictions, and paradoxes, and yet it still works.

PK But scale, clearly, is something of great interest to you.

MM: A lot of the pieces I've done over the years have involved alterations of scale and the idea of the viewer's relationship to the object and how we see things by either enlarging or reducing objects, it causes the viewer to look at them again. It's hard to do because our culture is so bombarded by images and media. How do you make something fresh for a viewer? That's a real challenge. How do you keep it alive and interesting and engaging? And so the idea of scale, it's always been a fascinating one to me or of compressing space, especially to do with architecture, you have to do that.

PK: Many of your works seem very architectural, but, of course, they also are sculptural, and I guess the word that certainly comes to mind is assemblage. You said, to me that the assemblage movement in California was influential on you, particularly George Herms.

MM: When I was just getting out of engineering and kind of discovering art, a friend of mine took me down to meet an artist friend of his, who was a metal sculptor that worked down at the Old Pot Shop in Venice on Sunset Avenue, and that was part of that epiphany I was telling you about of discovering Bohemian life that I didn't know about because my grandparents raised me. My father had an experience, but he hadn't told me much about it. Maybe you can't tell someone. Maybe you have to let them find out on their own, but seeing this guy living in the studio, making these amazing metal sculptures got me excited., again, someone making things by themselves.

PK: What was the guy's name?

MM: His name was Max Felthouse, something like that. I think he lives up in Ojai now. This was many years ago, around 1965, I would guess. I must have been all of like about 18 or 19 years old then. But I remember one of my neighbors knew this artist named Gordon Wagner and she took me down to this community center to see one of his shows. Actually, I saw his work before I saw George Herms, and Gordon Wagner was kind of fascinating. He was definitely one of the early assemblage pioneers. In fact, to spring ahead, I bought some of Gordon's tools after he passed away from his late widow, Virginia, and I use them to this day.

I met Gordon and we had some shows together and I liked him a lot, but they lived out in Pasadena. I was out here and I didn't see that much of them, but then I heard that he was ill. Actually, I was one of his pall bearers at his funeral. I went to visit Virginia a couple times after that and she had some of his stuff she wanted to give some to me and I ended up taking and I actually bought his old tool chest because he'd worked as an engineer, a machinist, for many years. So I have a lot of his machinist tools which I treasure and I like to use. There's something about using the past that is kind of nice. I'm a romantic.

PK: That sounds very much like a Japanese tradition, the master eventually passing on the tools. They have wonderful wood tools.

MM: Oh, wonderful, exquisite.

PK: George Tsutakawa in Seattle, he's in his eighties and Japanese American. He taught at the University [of Washington, Seattle] for many years, but he has an incredible set of tools for woodworking which he hasn't really done much of in years. He does both bronze and sculpture, but I guess my point is that with him, that

these tools take on a quality that, in some ways, goes beyond a simple function.

MM: Oh absolutely. I agree with that. There was a spiritual aspect, almost like an African fetish, a thing where the object takes on some kind of quality beyond its mere function. In fact, I was up at Han's place after he passed away. There was some stuff in his studio and a person in charge there, I asked if this one item was available and they said, "Sure, why don't you take that." It was one of Hans' hammers. I use that every day out in the shop. So, I like the idea of having these connections to my mentors. There's something personal about that, not that it makes it any better than a normal hammer, but it was his hammer.

PK: Well, what interests me about what you're saying, is that there's been a craftsman tradition, the heroic individuality of the artist who always has to start afresh and invent on his or her own. And what you're describing is a kind of satisfaction and these connections of participating in a continuum with these other practitioners who came before you.

MM: That's a good point. Like you mentioned earlier, was I a part of a tradition, and my answer then was no, but this is how I came to realize that there was a tradition and this is part of it, this idea of passing on knowledge as well as implements, and I like that very much, the idea of a human link with the future and the past. So we're all seen like links in this kind of funny chain of idea and concept that goes through time.

PK: I'm interested in your experience here in this area. You certainly come from this place and all your formative years were spent here. I would think you have to look at Los Angeles, Southern California, specifically Santa Monica as formative for you as an artist. What were your experiences? You mentioned, of course, popular culture in connections with the entertainment industry. Could you expand on that further?

MM: Well first of all, it was the time and place. Being born basically at the close of World War II and experiencing the Korean War as a small kid, I have vivid memories. A lot of neighbors were in both wars and there are always lots of movies relating to that. And World War II really was a boom to Los Angeles, a huge, huge spike in manufacturing.

PK: Yes, that's right in the defense industry or aerospace.

MM: You bet. So growing up here, this street now you might describe as a "Yuppie Boulevard," but when my grandparents were living here in the late forties and during most of the fifties, it was very much a blue-collar neighborhood. Almost all of my neighbors worked at Douglas Aircraft Company. It was the big employer of the region, and we'd take school field trips down there. I could hear them start and test the engines miles away. You can hear them running up the engines, and you see DC-3s flying all over the place at the time and DC-4s and their aircraft. And my friend, Strickfaden, sometimes would take me down with him on Saturdays. On Saturdays, they had a surplus disposal shop open at Douglas and you could buy things by the pound, so I used to buy sheets of aluminum, take them home, and make armor of it, suits of armor for myself, basically, in was in tin snips. And he used to buy stuff for his machines down there. It was all surplus aircraft parts. So there's this funny kind of world of invention out there. You can get the raw materials and you can make up your own reality. There was that aspect of the culture, going down along the boulevard, you would inevitably pass through the back lot of Fox [Twentieth Century Fox] Studios and over the tops of a barb-wire fence you could see the backs of castles and Norman cottages and you could see Fort Apache. This kind of stuff to a little kid was just absolutely riveting because, again, it was a blurring of a distinction between theater and film and reality so that anything is possible. I've always seen L.A. as a giant kind of laboratory for ideas in a caldron for concepts where you can try anything you want to and if it fizzles, so what, you try something else. There's a great book, a little book that Nathaniel West wrote called *The Day of the Locust*.

PK: Oh yeah, that's wonderful. It's one of my favorites.

MM: It's spot on the money. L.A. has a lot of tackiness to it, but at the same time, in that funny kind of fantasy pretentiousness, it's unpretentious because it's all here. It's what you make of it. It's a land of opportunity in a lot of ways. It's a great for an immigrant because it is what you make of it, and especially artists as workers in this culture, it offers so much, in terms of variety, of diversity. For years, the alleys of Los Angeles were my art store. I would find all kinds of amazing objects, and this started when I was a little kid. In the fifties, I used to pull a wagon around my alleys and I collected products from World War II. I would find old aviator caps or D-Day life belts, and things tossed out in the junk. It was basically a junk bin, but, to me, it was steeped in history and it's kind of amazing that I've struggled with what happened only ten years earlier. That's basically my experience in Los Angeles, and that's not all of it, but that and just the theater of the place, and the characters here. Did I answer that?

PK: Well, that's a good start.

MM: It's a start. It's scratching the surface.

PK: You talk about confronting a landscape and what you see and what you do with it is the artistic exchange. What you're describing is really a very different kind of response to an environment, and it isn't just the debris of the environment, but it's in artifacts. This explains perfectly assemblage that whole kind of esthetic, although there certainly were California artists who made wonderful landscapes in the thirties. Millard Sheets and others were doing some wonderful urban views of downtown L.A.

MM: Emil Kosa and the other painters did beautiful works.

PK: That's one kind of a response and it wasn't unavailable in L.A. It isn't that it was a part of an earlier L.A. art history, but that certainly wasn't the more conventional, more traditional notion of confronting and responding to your environment.

MM: It really comes from the European model. And vis-a-vis New York, but in a lot of ways, L.A. has always been kind of colonized or marginalized by New York. It still goes on to this day, but I would add that it really feeds New York because it provides artists for that system. This is really a laboratory where they grow the seeds and they go there and blossom because there's still not a lot of support in L.A. for artists.

[END SESSION #1, TAPE 1, SIDE B]
[BEGIN SESSION #1, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PK: You were describing the situation in L.A. earlier as a laboratory and also like a farm club.

MM: Yes, like a major league farm club, but I think it is changing. Certainly curators come here, probably more so now than they used to, although I still think New York still is the major power center economically.

PK: Getting back really to what we were talking about in terms of maybe testing new ideas or operating in an environment which is permissive for experimentation.

MM: One big disturbance, I think, between L.A. and New York is that New York is so condensed and together that it's very hard to be private there. There's a lot of constant interchange, people know what you're doing all the time. Here is the opposite, it's very spread out, unless you make a conscious effort to go someplace and look at something, you don't see it and we hear about it. It was funny, when I went to Australia in 1975 or 6, I met a ton of European artists and curators that I never would have met in Los Angeles, because it was a very condensed experience. Whereas here, curators do come through here all the time, but a lot of times you don't hear about until they've gone. So in that sense, it's a city where you can be very anonymous if you want to be, or even if you don't want to be. It just depends upon if you're on their list or not.

PK: Well that's interesting you say that because exactly the same observation was made in another Archives interview some years ago by David Hockney. What he finds attractive about Los Angeles, and he's a great fan of L.A., is this ability to be alone, to be by yourself, and you don't have to participate. As he pointed out, you do have to make this effort to find things to do socially or whatever, maybe culturally, and you really don't get bothered as much. His point is that in a studio in New York, London or Paris.

MM: I think that's a good point. Here, they bother movie and television people -- artists are kind of blessed and no one knows what they look like or even care. So in that sense, you're right. I really like that aspect here. We're quite unobserved and undisturbed if you so choose. Not that you always want to be undisturbed, but, it is nice to have some interest in the work, but that is an option.

PK: Of course the New York/L.A. or the New York/California story is one that's going to be discussed and debated on and on.

MM: Ad infinitum!

PK: Part of the reason has been the whole notion of regionalism, and what we're talking about now is exactly that. What are the qualities that distinguish this area as a creative environment? Traditionally, the light is sighted or in L.A., especially, the horrors of tonality. There are these very traditional notions of an environment or nature that determine, to a certain degree, a work of art. But in your case, if you say they're a factor at all, it's that you use elements from external the world, but it's internalized to a large degree.

MM: I see myself as a very eclectic person and artist. I use all kinds of sources for the work as maybe some large pieces. Ideas come from all kinds of areas; literature, popular culture, dreams, you name it, just the way L.A. as a geographical entity is very much a mixture of surf, desert, and the mountains, earthquakes and urban sprawl. Within an hour of driving, you can be out into the desert. I like that very much about living on the edge of a continent, conceptually is an interesting place to be. You're at this kind of juncture of a tectonic plate [geological causes of earthquakes]. The idea that the Pacific Ocean is right behind us as we speak, on a macro scale, is an interesting place to be.

PK: Well how would you contrast the experience of being on another ocean or being in proximity of the Atlantic? Do you see some fundamental differences? They're both big bodies of water. One, you're looking east and the other you're looking west. Are you willing to say that that has any meaning, say even psychologically?

MM: I've thought about that. I like the idea of watching the sun go down in the ocean. I've always felt comfortable about that, I like sunsets. There's something about a westward movement that seems -- although the Irish refer to going West as a metaphor for dying. I see it differently.

PK: And you, of course, are Irish background.

MM: Half of me is, the other part is Italian. All my ancestors kept going West. They came from Italy, west to New York, and from New York, out to California, so this is a funny kind of orbital move-around-the-globe that way. The Chumash Indians had this spot up on the coast where they could imagine a gate to heaven was westward out over the ocean, so this is kind of a metaphoric aspect of that, being at the edge of two contrasting geographical features, the land mass and the water mass. That's very interesting. Plus, the Pacific is a lot bigger than the Atlantic.

PK: That's true. And besides, if you go across the Pacific, and especially if you go in a southerly direction, you'll end up in Australia.

MM: You bet, just cross the pond.

PK: Well let me ask you about this sense that there are very strong connections of experience and a feeling between California and Australia. And this has to do absolutely with sense of place, how you experience a place. How would you describe it? Do you agree with that observation that the two, California and Australia, have?

MM: I see a lot of parallels. One thing that comes to mind in thinking about Australia, my first impression was how odd it was to find a European society in the South Pacific, of Southeast Asia. This is really an Asian sphere in that part of the world, and there's this odd kind of transplanted sense I felt there of nineteenth century European architecture and English culture specifically, in this tropical Austral-Asian land mass. On top of that, there's the ancient Aboriginal tradition of their culture going back for thousands of years. There are some disturbing parallels with American culture in the eradication of indigenous people, the Aboriginals there and the Native American Indians here. So there are some rather disturbing parallels of European colonization happening in both places. But leaving that behind us, it makes for a very interesting kind of blend of points of view.

PK: As far as I can tell, Australia isn't anywhere near as diverse as certainly America, and certainly L.A., and, in many ways, is still pretty homogeneous.

MM: There are areas in Sydney where there are Aboriginal neighborhoods, like Redfern and places like that, but they're really marginalized in a lot of ways. And, it was pretty much a white colony, settled primarily by English convicts that were transported from England. Once England lost the use of North America as a kind of a dumping ground for their sociopaths and ne're-do-wells, they started shipping them to south of the Equator, like in [Robert] Hughes' book, *The Fatal Shore*.

PK: *The Fatal Shore*?

MM: Oh, it's amazing stuff, a beautifully-written history, not so pretty at times. Up until World War II, it was very much an English culture, a lot of Irish, Scottish, and English immigrants living there, primarily an agricultural society, and culture. After World War II, a lot of European immigrants moved there, Italians and Greeks and even some Germans. They used to park POWs there, and after the war, a lot of them left Europe and moved there. Of course at the time, they were under-populated and they tried to increase the population, and they did. So now, we have more of a European culture than it was say 50 years ago, and now there are more Asians moving in, but for a long time, there's a real bias against even non-white Europeans living there. And still to this day, the state of Queensland is fairly -- or at least it was when I was there, notorious as being a racist state with notable exceptions and individuals.

PK: Based on your visits, some years ago, or was it last time you were there?

MM: 1984 was my last visit.

PK: Based your various visits to Australia, do you see any notable similarities, points of contrast between the art itself and art production? I realize, of course, that contemporary art is basically pretty international now.

MM: No. When I was there the idea of regionalism was almost vanishing because of the impact of magazines and image media in transmission, so in that sense -- and they were always very much looking out for what was happening in Europe and North American. They were very hungry for interaction with other artists and such and

I found that quite interesting, and that was fine as art really is kind of a “global of village,” to coin a term or phrase by Marshall McLuhan. Let's see, where was that thought going?

PK: Looking abroad, looking to the U.S. and to Europe.

MM: There's a real search, I think, for their own work, some were more successful than others. Aboriginal painting has been done sometimes by non-Aboriginal artists.

PK: Right, well there was a recent scandal about that.

MM: Oh really? I'm not surprised.

PK: I didn't follow it closely, but it even made the press here recently. You do what you have to do to get attention, but where am I going with this? I think, in part, I'm interested in the psychology of place.

MM: Oh, the place? From a perceived center, I think.

PK: And this is something, of course, that I think you would agree Californians have had, although most of them have thought it worth it, been one way or another.

MM: Well that's why I'm still here.

PK: Still this perception of being at a distance, and somehow it's like as any phenomenon, it diminishes, it decreases. But, would you agree that that's been part of the psychology of the creative community in California? And, if so or if not, did you find that was the case maybe even more so in Australia?

MM: Oh very much so, yeah. You really feel it there. I did. I always listened to the news of California and I would become excited to hear about it. I really felt it when I spent some time in Tasmania. I was even offered a job for a year at one of the universities there, and I knew for about half a second I didn't want to stay there that long because I really felt it physically that I was somewhere else. It's a beautiful island state and I met some wonderful people there, but I knew I'd spend the year there especially. That's the first time I really felt it to that degree. I have an old friend that is down there, lived there for a long time, and he seemed to thrive in that environment. So there was a sense of being on the edge of something one definite center.

PK: What kind of a dynamic does that create? I'm now looking at Australia as a kind of parallel or maybe even a model for understanding the situation in California, but I realize you're not equipped.

MM: No, but they do have this rivalry, this double-city rivalry, Melbourne and Sydney. Some kind of centers of that parallel. I think, the idea of feeling that results may be two kinds of reactions; either you reject wanting to be near the center, or you're hungry for it. I would see a lot of artists' work there, but you could see the influence by things that had been filtered through magazine and media. I would see that every so often, and that happens anywhere, you can't avoid it. Regionalism seems to be disappearing now faster and faster as communication gets more efficient.

PK: Well, okay, but given that, let's look at the very pluralistic and diverse art of Los Angeles or Southern California, acknowledging the pluralism which seems to be one of its main characteristics, and the different communities and groups and even autobiography, personalism, identity politics, and all of that that's so much a part of this post-modern experience. Do you see everything becoming one homogenizing, or do you still a flavor of quality that you could identify as somewhat characteristic of California as opposed to West Coast and East Coast? Do you still see that?

MM: Let me say that I happen to like regionalism, whatever that means. I like the idea of art that somehow specifically reflects some aspect of a community or culture from which was created, the idea of uniform art sounds dreadfully boring and almost fascist in its implication. So in that sense, I really celebrate the idea of a place that allows for a range of ideas and certainly L.A. does that. I don't know how I'd characterize the work here. Maybe I'm a bit of a hermit, so I don't get out that much anyway. I don't go to galleries every day because it's so rare that I like what I see. There's a lot of bad art out there and a lot of it is because art has found its way into the university, where it probably shouldn't be. It's frankly art history, but I think studio work is another area.

PK: I think that's a legitimate observation. It's kind of a debate. People still do talk about that. Where does it belong?

MM: I mean it's funny. I think that to be a good artist, you have to have ideas as well as manual skills. It's a blend of the two, hopefully, and there are a lot of people there that can do things well, but they might not be devoid of good ideas or maybe they're not especially interesting ideas, or maybe there's a good idea that a person is unable to execute in the manner that does justice to the idea. So in that sense, when I think of universities, I think of it's a conceptual experience where you open up your mind primarily. I've always thought

of it as a research place, whereas the art studio is that, too, but you're working in other ways; there are other ways you're trying to solve a problem. There's a funny phrase I heard in Australia called "dumb as a painter." It was a phrase used years ago to describe a person that worked without thought, and was obviously a pejorative aimed against studio artists, but that's not necessarily the case. I think good art has good concept behind it. Nothing can always articulate fully the way a Ph.D. candidate can articulate their thesis, because artists work with a combination of intuition and intellect blended together and out comes whatever they produce. So it's a blend of kind of a sensual response to material and an intellectual response to idea, maybe a blend of the two.

PK: One of the things that's interesting about you is that you actually enjoy crafting and fabricating, seems to me. And I think of you in a sense of the conceptual artist and there are conceptual artists who really do believe with Duchamp, that the idea is the creative act, and the reification or realization of that idea, the building of it, the materializing of it, is just a document. That clearly isn't the case with you because your love of the craft and building are evident.

MM: Well, I've always seen process as part of the thinking process. It really forms the gestation of the work. I'll get an idea; I want to express this idea, so I'll -- sometimes I'll start it, but during the process of making the object -- if it's an object or a painting -- it changes. It never goes in a linear progression from A to Zed. It's always this kind of circuitous, stumbling, groping in the dark kind of process of evolving. And that's very much part of the birth of the piece. So in that sense, the process, the craft of making it is really an extension of a thought of the piece. When you finish building it, then it's done, but then it starts a new life. When it's out there in the world and people interact or don't interact. So that's the artist's involvement with the object, he's finished; he's done; and then it goes on from there. So in that sense, there's a physical and conceptual there that are interlocked.

[END SESSION #1, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION #1, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PK: So this is continuing with Michael C. McMillen, Tape 2, Side B.

MM: Well, let's see, we were talking about the process, the actual, physical construction of the object, and you were saying that Duchamp or people who have taken Duchamp as like their role model and, of course, I appreciate him also. Well for some people, that is valid. Maybe people are satisfied with thinking of something and if they're happy, that's good, but it's not for everyone and we live in a physical world and I love the idea of engaging the object, whether it be architecture or a piece of good graphic design, or a good painting, or piece of sculpture, or even a piece of industrial manufactured object. A piece of engineering can be quite beautiful, too, or a photomicrograph, or a cosmic photograph. We're physical beings and why deny that. So in that sense, it's very sensual to have an object that has the power to communicate some emotion or a state or give you some sense. Art is a funny thing. It's a communicative medium. It really is, and it works outside of literature, the movies, stage, it has its own realm. It's like when you say "The Arts," those are all the arts, dance, theater, ballet. So within that set of areas of expression, we have visual art and it is visual and it's about looking at something and seeing it in the light with our eyes, maybe touching it or not touching it, or wanting to touch it, not being able to touch it. That's why I went into the realm of installation work because I wanted to basically immerse the viewer in more experience than looking at something. I wanted them to smell it and to touch it and to be surrounded by it. I wanted to really communicate an experience as full as I could, so I would use sound and smells and such, so in that sense, that's why those ideas, I did had to be expressed through the agency of installation work as opposed to, say a piece of sculpture or a painting or a drawing or a photograph.

PK: Do you ever use temperature?

MM: Sometimes. Once I built an installation that had steam coming out on the legs of the viewer at the first part, very sticky and warm, and then it went through a doorway into a refrigerator chamber, down a corridor that's absolutely ice cold into a huge room again, so there was kind of a contrast of temperatures. And that's something that you can never convey in photograph or in sound, so we have these physical things call bodies. We might as well use them.

PK: Does it show a predilection for a California situation where there is a sensuality, and also a body awareness, because we have a climate that allows us to be outside? I'm not saying this is unique to this area at all, but it does seem that it's been focused on pretty heavily. How do you feel about that? Do you see that as -- not the exclusive preview of California, but very comfortable, very indigenous, if you will?

MM: A large part of California is a sensual state. It has a huge range of geographical features and in addition to the deserts and the mountains and the huge coast line. As a kid, we used to ride our bikes down to the beach and go swimming every summer. There's something about the weather here, you didn't have to bundle up in the wintertime. There's a reason people came to California, like I told you earlier, my parents were driven out by bad weather and there is a sensual quality to this place, the kind of plants that grow here. The fact that we don't

have harsh seasons, at least in southern California, like they have in the East, means you can have convertible cars. There's more sunshine, per year here, and it affects people psychologically and physically. The architecture can be different here. There're no harsh winters to survive. This is not Fargo. We have earthquakes, but that's quite another can of worms. I think California has always been an attractive place for that, a lot of strange cults have been here over the years. Again, it's an experimental place.

PK: You see these as aspects of presumably a permissive, open, creative environment, and that this does have an effect of some sort.

MM: Yes, I think so. Part of it is the autonomy that the geography of Los Angeles offers. I remember the Beatniks a little bit when I was a kid. I have this vague recollection of the Beats and that whole thing. There's the Gas House down in Venice that was like a hang-out. I remember going with my folks down to the beach either to Malibu or down to Playa del Rey when we still had oil derricks down there, this is before the marina was built. There were these funky, little old craftsmen houses down there and beach houses and it was a place where no one bothered you. I used to hear stories about the marshes east of the marina where people could go rabbit hunting, and there's a funny kind of a laissez faire quality to the place where you could pretty much do what you wanted to do, within reason. It's not a small town in Middle America where everybody knows what you're doing at all times, and I think that lack of scrutiny makes it possible for people to think their own thoughts. They don't have to conform as much as people in a small town would. My dad left his hometown for a reason. It was too small. I was back there a couple of years ago and I could see why he left. You either became part of the fabric of the town or you left, and somewhere in my dad's soul, there was a Bohemian heart beating and he had to get out, and he did. That's why New York and L.A. were very attractive places for people who wanted to see more of the world. It's just the weather is better here and he had more options.

PK: Of course the weather is famous, and like so many other things about this area, it is sometimes celebrated even more, so it becomes a mythology that was started by the Chamber of Commerce. It's one of the most exaggerated versions of inventing a place to suit all your dreams and fulfill needs. There's also a description of the built environment that seems to be so chaotic, and I can't think of any place that's more chaotic than L.A., which, of course, is much vilified for that, but I actually find that it depends on how you look at it. You can also find it infinitely rich like layers and layers of desire.

MM: Oh, absolutely. L.A. is definitely that kind of city. Basically, it grew as a result largely of the automobile. It certainly expanded as the result of personal transportation. As you know, it's a two-edge-sword, but it's a fascinating place. It's an onion-skin, you keep peeling and the more you discover. I've spent most of my life here and I'm still amazed at things that I don't know about the place. There're a lot of places I've never been to yet and I may never even make it. There's so much here and there's so much of a variety in terms of culture now. There's a huge Asian population. There must be something like 80 different languages or dialects spoken in Los Angeles. We have a Little Saigon, Lil' Tokyo, Chinatown, a Little Taipei, and there's a Filipino neighborhood. It's amazing. It's all here in one big city. In a lot of ways, the city is unique in the world because it's hard to find another city that has the diversity and range. It's a microcosmic planet, if you look at it that way. And in that sense, it's very much an experimental city.

PK: We're talking about demographics and diversity, does that affect your thinking in any way that perhaps could be reflected in your work? Does it carry over in any way, do you think?

MM: I always thought that art that is produced somehow has to reflect the zeitgeist or the ambiance and the time and the history in which it is produced. I think it's inescapable. It's like we look back now, at work done savoring the thirties, and you can almost tell it was done during that period of time, the style it was done in or something or maybe it's the subjects that were addressed of the work, but I think it does reflect the specificity of the time that the work references somehow. Now maybe, that's a style of period or something, I don't know. I think my work, or the things that interest me, come out of my reaction to history. We're living history all the time, in the papers, in the news, you think about stuff and it goes into your brain and you think about it and it comes out somehow. You have an idea;; you've heard a phrase, or you're angry, or something disturbs you, or something seems paradoxical to you, you explore that idea, much like a writer would explore maybe an idea through metaphor. Maybe artists use their vehicle to explore ideas, so I think the things that interest me are the kind of idea of continuous change and how nothing stays the same and it's always disintegrating into something more.

PK: Well that's really interesting if you'd be willing to then draw a connection between that and the society here in the city in which you live.

MM: It's changing all the time. The dominant Anglo culture is changing. The European culture is here, but it's not going to be dominant much longer, and it is even changing now, Hispanic, African American, Asian, and all other kinds of sub-sets in addition to the European culture in this city, and somehow it can't not change. Having lived on this street for almost 45 years, not continuously, I've lived other places, but I've watched many families come

and go. I've watched generations of kids grow up and leave and so forth, and I've seen it change from an all white street to now it's Asian families and interracial marriages on the street. I think that's a very good sign. In my own family, my oldest brother married a woman from Okinawa and I have two Amerasian nieces. In my wife's family, in her family, she has Jewish, Chinese, and Mexican. So it's like a Little U.N. in a lot of ways. That's just the future of the states in general. And all those cultures are here and we encounter them every day. If you look at a lot of my work, you'll find Asian calligraphy and Spanish words and phrases and things like that, things that I've grown up with, and I've tried somehow to integrate into these pieces. If you come up to the piece very closely, often you'll find inscriptions, a text in the wood, in the pieces. It's not real obvious at first, but if you look closely, it kind of emerges, just the way L.A. merges over time if you look at it closely.

PK: Well the notion of change, I realize that you have to be careful about forcing these parallels and art historians tend to that all the time. What you described in the very beginning about your work is that the essential quality of the work, from your life experience and then of the human condition, and certainly, dramatically shown in Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century. It would seem that this then becomes the one essential constant, and that is change and transformation.

MM: Absolutely.

PK: Is that part of what you're then getting at in your work?

MM: The idea of flux, kind of constant change, whether it be our sense of time or geological time or cosmic time. It's always there, and I think that maybe it's a way of dealing with the idea of mortality, trying to acknowledge the fact that all things change, and whereas, maybe death is the end of one state of being it's the beginning of something else. I'm not talking about going to heaven or being reincarnated as a toad, but I'm talking about the idea that the molecules in our bodies, or at least the atoms, were here at the beginning of the universe, and the sense that we are basically matter. We kind of come from the earth, literally, as manifestations of this matter, and we eventually go back into the earth to become something else. I don't want to sound smaltzy and romantic, but that's kind of part of it, too.

PK: Do you find this notion comforting, by the way, or is it just an observation?

MM: The idea of getting old and dying, falling apart, does not sound fun at all to me, but it's an observation that I'm sure I'm not the first one to express. There're thousands of year of history attest to the same thing. Maybe it's the way I'm personally dealing with that inevitable transition. So I'm making metaphors out of the work possibly to think about that and try to get comfortable with the idea.

PK: Have you thought about that before or did it just occur to you now?

MM: Oh, no. This is a long thought. I've thought the idea of a transient image. My first show I ever did out of Northridge was a big installation called Transient Images and it was all about objects that could not be possessed. They were light phenomena or smoke, things that existed momentarily in the darkness of the space and then gone. So even then, I was thinking about change.

PK: But specifically in terms of the implications, of course, being that aging, decay, and death ...

MM: Sounds awful, doesn't it? Like a Buddhist, that's how it is. Like on the flag of India the Buddhist dharma chakra, or wheel of life. That's exactly what it is. It's a cycle -- birth to death -- and what we do in between is called life and what you make it. It's basically a one-spin merry-go-round. Or as George Herms said, "Everybody gets a chance at bat." I love that imagery.

PK: You got to go at it..

MM: But that's what I like about the idea of the aesthetic experience, the idea of both enjoying looking at works of art and how they kind of talk to you, and also the process of making art, getting back to that idea of the aesthetic experience of making art is very important, It's another way of thinking. Instead of just using your brain, you're using your hands to think with. They're different connections, the brain that comes through the fingertips as opposed that comes through the eyes and ears. Have I talked enough about place? I haven't stirred it successfully?

PK: We haven't stirred it at all. Besides, it's not that easy. I mean it's not one-to-one. One wants to avoid making simplistic connections.

MM: No, it's hard.

PK: Right, and that, of course, seems very obvious, but for artists, that's very, very important, if they're really in-tuned to observing and responding. You've given me actually quite a bit.

MM: Oh, good. Well, I definitely was influenced by the presence of the motion picture industry and seeing it and visiting in as a child. I worked about maybe 15, 14 years full time in the movie business. It was freelance, different movies. I worked on Close Encounters of the Third Kind and Blade Runner. It was a very rich film, a real fun thing to work on. Once I got out of graduate school, I had to find some kind of employment. I've had many weird jobs in my background, but I luckily stumbled into Hollywood and found employment. A lot of my skills I learned in my art work. I had direct application to set design and construction. And so I just saw it as an ongoing education. It was a wonderful post-graduate education. And there were some fascinating people I met and I still see to this day. It was just a good way of buying time for my studio work. Between films, I would take off time and do my own work. When I ran out of money, I'd go back and get a movie to work on.

PK: Well this is what we could talk about next time. We've done two hours.

[END SESSION #1, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[BEGIN SESSION #2, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: This is a second interview session with Artist Michael C. McMillen, August 19th, 1997. The last session, #1, was April 15th, earlier this year. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom, and the interview is being conducted outside on the patio at Michael's home/studio on Princeton Street in Santa Monica, and this is, of course, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Last time, back in April, we were -- we moved around a bit, but in terms of a kind of chronological development for you and your art career, your life, we had you somehow, I think, finished with school. One occupation was a prop maker for studios. Which one, mainly?

MM: It was model-maker/prop-maker kind of work at different studios. I worked at Fox. Gosh, let's see which ones, a lot of the work for Paramount, different ones. A lot of the work I did was down in the Marina area. Douglas Trumble used to have an effects studio there and we worked on Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

PK: You worked on that?

MM: That was my first big feature. My very first movie was a John Frankenheimer movie I did in 1973, but that film I think was out all of one week and then they pulled it.

PK: Oh, really? Why?

MM: It was a tragically flawed script. It was during the "roaring seventies" and it had Edmund O'Brien and Richard Harris. It was called 99 & 44/100 Percent Dead. If there ever was a prophetic title for a movie, that was it. That was the first movie I worked on that I got paid for. A friend of mine, a guy from graduate school, and I started a little prop business out of school since we had to earn a living some how, so we landed this job making these props for a gangster movie, a spoof, actually. The opening scene of the movie takes place beneath the surface of the East River, and this camera pans past different objects under water. You realize these are actually bodies in cement blocks and then different picturesque of gangster disposal, so we had a lot of fun with that. We made a lot of life-sized to mid-life-size skeletons and bodies that were tied in to wheelchairs or in steam cabinets or in baby buggies. We took a lot of gambling equipment, actual old slot machines and roulette wheels and encrusted them with barnacles. So it was a very interesting introduction to the wild world of Hollywood.

PK: What was again the name of that film?

MM: The name was lifted from the old Ivory Soap Flakes box. It was called 99 & 44/100 Percent Dead. It was out for maybe a week or two and then it was pulled. I've never even seen it in the video stores.

PK: What year was it?

MM: 1973.

PK: Okay, so that, in effect, marks your entree to that particular occupation?

MM: Yes. I would mark that as the first official entree into Hollywood. So that was kind of an interesting introduction into the business of Hollywood. I liked it very much. It was interesting and really drew upon a lot of skills I had learned on my own as an artist.

PK: Now remind me, because it [last session] was way back in April, but you were at Cal State Northridge?

MM: Here's the sequence. I started at Santa Monica City College. I had these aspirations of being a chemical engineer, so I took a lot of science classes, and then at one point, was forced to take an art class as a prerequisite for majors that weren't art majors. Lo and behold, it was wonderful. This is fun. This is a very over-simplified explanation, but I eventually changed to an art major and transferred up to Northridge, or Valley State College [California State University, Northridge] as it was then.

PK: So you got your B.A. there, your bachelor's degree?

MM: Yes.

PK: And then did you go on for an M.A., M.F.A. [at Northridge]?

MM: I started to. They wanted me to stay there for graduate work but then I applied to UCLA and was accepted. I went for an M.A. first, and then one of my professors wanted me to stay until the end of the year and keep working. I had a T.A. ship [teaching assistantship] at the time, so I said okay, and I stuck it out. Then in '73, I graduated with a M.F.A.

PK: All right, and so then also in 1973, you set up this little enterprise with your fellow student.

MM: It was called Zeno Properties. He was a photo major at school. I will not name this person, because I should probably protect him. It my first encounter with a real control freak. I didn't know what the term meant before I met this guy. Oh, man, I couldn't work with him. He was like the ultimate micro-manager before they had a word for that behavior pattern. By the end of the movie was the end of the business. We split up and went our separate ways.

PK: Well who got Zeno Properties?

MM: I think I left it to him.

PK: That's important to know. Otherwise, you get blamed for some of Zeno's work.

MM: Oh, no. Zeno had a short life thereafter. I think he and another friend picked up the ball and started making little products for the Akron stores. And then that kind of faded. Then they started making these little buildings for these miniature golf courses and they asked me to come back and join them. I said, "I don't think so. Thanks, guys, but I got other things I got to do right now." So I excused myself from going back into that partnership.

PK: But you continued on your own sort of on a freelance basis did you actually get on staff at one of the studios?

MM: Not right away. After that, I had to get a job and I was hired by this landscaping contractor out in the [San Fernando] Valley. He had seen this sculpture of mine about a year earlier in my studio out in the Valley and it was a coin-operated waterfall. It was a big piece of furniture and you put a dime into it and push a button and it would cascade water down this thing. It was kind of a parody of nature and land, furniture and functionality, and nature's furniture and that kind of stuff. It was a very funny piece, actually, and he remembered this. And this guy was a real entrepreneur and he hired me to work for him and he wanted me to make giant rock molds, and so he was going to pre-cement boulders. This is now a going business 20 years later or 30 years later.

PK: You mean these are fake rocks?

MM: Oh, yes. I spent about a year scouting around L.A. finding sites and then making these giant latex boulder molds. We were out there with a crew of guys making these molds and peeling them off and then we'd go to job sites and pour cement into these things and paint them like rocks afterwards. It was bizarre. The product wasn't fully developed yet, but this guy was always pushing. "That stuff doesn't matter. Let's go ahead and build it," and so he had this job out at Cal Tech [California Institute of Technology, Pasadena] making these big stones and they came out looking like dinosaurs.

PK: These were for landscaping?

MM: Oh, yeah. I mean Moore-Udell, Charles Moore. He was one of the architects in this project and Phil talked him into using these rocks. Unfortunately, these rocks weren't really field-tested yet, and what happen was they ended up looking like giant cow pies, like dinosaur/cow pies. They were big. They were funny. They were really heavy. You had to lift them with a crane. It was a fiasco.

PK: Well what happened finally?

MM: They worked them into some kind of a landscaping scheme, but it was an early experiment that should have stayed as an experiment.

PK: You weren't asked to do more of those?

MM: Actually, it took off. They eventually developed a technology where they had better control. They knew what they were doing, but by that time, during the recession, I was laid off to part-time work, and then a friend of mine who had been hired -- he's now deceased. His name is Chris Wyman, a really amazing paper marbler,

who specialized in reinventing and rediscovering the techniques of Turkish paper marbling. Anyhow, Chris and I were friends, and he called up one day and said that there's this guy that needs some -- he knew about my background in chemistry and he was working for this guy doing a movie -- some kind of smoke effects, some consulting work on how to make smoke and laser light. So he called me and said, "Why don't you call this guy and see if he wants to hire you," and so I went down to this place with a friend of mine and talked to him about smoke, and then it turned out it was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, totally serendipitous, and incidental to the smoke. They asked if they could see some of my other work, so I showed them a folio I had of black-and-white photographs of this piece I had done called *Inner City*, and it's like a series of five miniature buildings. They were fairly detailed.

PK: But that was actually a work of art right? Concurrently you were making art?

MM: I was making art before I worked in the movies and, in fact, the miniature city that I built was strictly for art, but it happened to get me into the film business as a model maker. And thank God it did because jobs were scarce back then.

PK: What year was that, the *Close Encounters*?

MM: It was like '74, I think, '75, around there.

PK: So your work as an artist was related, it served as a portfolio for a different kind of activity in which you could make a living.

MM: Exactly.

PK: But in your mind, you wouldn't describe these ever as the same activity?

MM: No. I was pretty clear about the distinction. I mean I think film can be art, but when I was working on films and was making objects for films, I had no confusion about what they were. They were props for films, but they could be art given the context. It's back to that Duchampian idea of what do you say it is?

PK: Well if we can avoid getting trapped on this conundrum or whatever it is interesting, though, because here you are, a young artist starting out. You find that happily, you can make a living doing a similar -- in terms of the skills involved and the practices.

MM: The same skills, different applications.

PK: And you say that you kept these very separate in your mind. What imbued the work that you did as an artist with those qualities that made it fine art? Imagine a situation where you had to build a miniature landscape for a film that's supposed to look big and in almost every respect, although the functions are different, it would be identical to a Michael McMillen work.

MM: It could be. Interesting isn't it? That's funny. Well the piece at the Oakland Museum [of California] is a good illustration of that. Aristotle's Cage is basically post- perspective in miniature with audio effects and its perspective and you look at it and it transports you. In that same way it could be used very successfully in a film, but it's not. It's a work of art and it's presented as such in a museum context, whereas it could be presented as a set in a movie studio. So a lot of it is its intent and context.

PK: What if some of those sets were saved and stored from whatever film, as I imagine often they are, isn't that right?

MM: A lot of times, most sets are struck at the end of a film and they'll destroy it, but parts of them are saved. I remember when I was working at Paramount going by the old scene docks and seeing stored miniatures from films out there. They're beautiful. I always thought of them as art. I saw them as a potentially works of art.

PK: So conceivably, if, for some reason, several of these Aristotle's Cage type things, had been saved, and then Michael McMillen gets a reputation as an exhibiting artist, then all of a sudden, then whoever is in charge of the studio is smart enough to realize what they have, say "We've got these Michael McMillen's. Let's take them to Sothebys."

MM: I'm sure that could happen, if they could author-ship. I worked on a film for Spielberg, 1941. I did a lot of work on that radio-controlled tank. I built the whole suspension system. I made the foundry patterns for the turret and the wheels, the suspension, I did a lot of work on that film, and I even actually signed the back of the wheels patterns. There're my initials on the back of part of it. Now if that still exists, which I don't think it does, but who's to say. I'm sure they could be shown at Sotheby's, but I think more so because it belonged to Spielberg than because I had anything to do with it. But also on that piece, there were other people who worked on it, too so it's really not a singular situation. I mean that's the big distinction. A lot of times, you'll have teams

of people working on these tableaux, whereas, when I'm working, it's usually just me.

PK: It seems to me that you have this very clearly in your mind that there's no problem with confusing these, and yet actually, you don't see any reason why the works that were done to function in the film, and basically create illusion, couldn't as well be viewed as works of art, given certain conditions. Probably part of it would be authorship.

MM: I think so.

PK: Did you have complete control of the realization?

MM: Right. In other words, who's the art director? Are you following instructions from somebody else or is it your invention? Because often in the case of film it is that you have multiple authors at every level. You have the art director, and you have director, and then the director of photography, and they all have input, then you've got field changes made on the set, that weren't anticipated, or a situation that might occur that require changes. I did a lot of work on Blade Runner along with other people. One thing I did very specific was an elevator car that goes up the side of the Tyrell building. I still have the patterns I made for it out in my workshop in my archives, so I've saved a lot of souvenirs from Hollywood where I've worked in films. I have souvenir little things that I've worked on because I hate to see it go into the dumpster and a lot of it does. Plus, I like to recycle things.

PK: So how would it work in a movie like Blade Runner, directed by Ridley Scott, who I think is superb visually, his films are films of heavy action.

MM: I call him a visually literate director.

PK: And so what kind of interaction then did you have with him or at least in his vision?

MM: There's an industrial designer, Sid Mead that did a lot of the kind of concept work on the film, although he wasn't the production designer, nor the art director, he was like a special consultant that was hired, and he did a lot of the overall look of the film. He designed some of those flying cars and kind of looked at the city, things like that. That was very much an influence.

PK: And so did you work with him?

MM: Not directly. I worked under Mark Stetson who was the head of the model shop at that time, and he would then interface with the director and so forth and pass it down to us, what was needed, and would assign different props or different things for us to work on. And out of that came very interesting collaborative works.

PK: Did you feel that -- and we won't dwell on this indefinitely, but did you feel that in some cases, you were given enough latitude that you could feel that these creations were, well, performing a function and achieving an effect as required by the script, but that in their realization, they became your idea of...

MM: Oh, yeah, yeah. I had a lot of latitude on a number of films, so I was able to make design decisions esthetic decisions, and have fun with it. And as long as it works, they're not going to worry about it, generally. They just want to get the product out. For them, it's product. Out the door, money; time is money; 5 o'clock and you're done. They don't care that you're having a great esthetic experience building this thing. So in that sense, it's kind of nice being left alone to work and produce these things. It was a good education, past graduate school, all the practical stuff you learned. Also, you'd see a lot of interesting visual irony on movie sets all the time, you know duality, set illusions, the reality, all that stuff. You play with interesting materials that you couldn't afford to otherwise. You meet interesting people that you work with, have special machinists or mold makers and make-up people, and people who make prosthetic appliances for actress' faces. It's really interesting kind of witch's brew of people in that business, aside from the sleeze bags you hear about on the financial end.

PK: Well, your work had already evolved in that direction to a degree anyway when you were finished at UCLA, I suppose. It wasn't a big leap to begin to build these things you were already working in the miniaturization.

MM: Let me back up a little bit. I started out things with painting and I liked that very much, but let's see, should I blame it on LSD or what?

PK: No, no, blame it on whatever you like. It's your interview.

MM: I only did it once or twice in my whole life, but it was enough, but I really wanted to create an experience in the viewer that was as total as I could make it, and painting for me wasn't doing it. So I started building these installations, things that were transient, ephemeral. They were purely experiential and non-tangible things. So my early works were like that. So because of the scale problems in space and that equates to money, I wanted to see if I could condense the experience down to a smaller size and still have some kind of an experience. So one of my early pieces was a miniature room that you looked out through a security lens and the images were

reversed. This is like 1972 maybe. I'm not sure, early '70s.

PK: What was it called? I mean isn't that the way you look at Mike's Pool Hall.

MM: Mike's Pool Hall was like a second room after that. So that was kind of the way of making a three-dimensional trompe l'oeil, creating a space where they're none existed which necessitated these miniature, and then that just opened a whole new area of work. And one of the dangers of working in that I knew early on was having it confused with the dollhouse, so I did not, in any way, want to try and mimic a dollhouse, so I never tried to depict figures directly in the piece, but they were like empty rooms, rooms that had just been left and exited. So they had a grittiness to them that you don't often find in dollhouses.

[END SESSION #2, TAPE 3, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION #2, TAPE 3, SIDE B]

PK: [We are] doing the second session interview with Michael McMillen. This is Tape 1, Side B, and you were talking about these early miniature rooms that were not to be confused with dollhouses.

MM: I should explain how the room was investigated by the viewer. I took an actual door from an old house I'd found. In fact, this is very much like part of a film set because I took an old door and I constructed a wall around it as if you'd sliced out part of a wall with a door in it and put that into a gallery. In the back of it, actually, it had a fold-down set like braces and weights to stabilize it so it's like this, and then a shelf behind it on which sat the miniature room. When the viewer came up to it, they could actually push the doorbell or ring the doorbell inside the room. There was a notepad on the door, and they could leave notes if they wanted to. There was a piece of carpeting at the floor that defined the space in front of the door so you'd feel like you were in a phantom hallway. As you looked inside the room, you saw this kind of slightly seedy room with a television set going, a disheveled, old iron bed in the corner, and the light was on in the room beyond which was the kitchen. You saw part of a refrigerator and a stove and yellow kitchen color, kind of a depressing scene, and a big W.C. Fields poster on the wall in the bedroom. Then every so often, I built this machine, device that would pump out the odor of cheap perfume and cigar butts right under your nose as you peered into it. It was disgusting, but it would do it every few seconds, a little puff of stuff.

PK: So, if you looked too long, you might miss it, Russian roulette.

MM: Exactly, nasal roulette. So that was an attempt at engaging more of the viewer's senses than just their eyes alone.

PK: One of the clear differences between the work for the movie props and sets and the art pieces is that, the purpose of the movie work was to create an illusion which, of course, is what movies are about.

MM: And it served the story.

PK: I don't get the sense that that is a paramount concern of yours at all in the work except to say perhaps that an illusion a method to achieve other goals that have to do with perception.

MM: Exactly, right on the money. In film, all they care about is how it looks. Does it serve the story? And although it may, often there's nothing about metaphor even remotely associated with the set or whatever. There might be, but it's rare. The art film has that, whereas in the things I was building, they're often about metaphor, and the fact that they were miniatures was a device somehow to either alter the viewer's perception of the piece for some reason or to condense space on a practical level, like Inner City could not be built. It was five, full-size buildings. So a way of condensing the object to where the viewer's sense of their own scale is a question, so it was a way of playing with kind of the idea of perception and using it in the service of communicating some idea or getting a metaphor across.

PK: We're going to have a chance to talk in another session, I hope, about specific works and, as they say, revisit some of these themes, so this is a subject we'll have a chance to develop. But I'm interested now as we try to trace some kind of a chronology to the career. What was happening in your life during this period? We're talking about now, I guess, the late '70s or during that time. You were involved in the model-making work for a good number of years, you said.

MM: I did it about 13 or 14 years.

PK: So what was happening to Michael McMillen during this time? I mean, obviously, you had this source of income and you were also making art having a studio of your own, right?

MM: I had a studio. Well, actually, it was just a garage. I've always just called it a workshop because of all it is, really.

PK: You don't call it a studio? Well what do you call that thing in back of your house?

MM: A big garage. It's a bigger garage, a workshop. It's where you work. It's where the mind meets the fingertips. It's where the hammer meets the thumb.

PK: Where was this garage? I mean it was here all along?

MM: That's it. All along. This was my grandparents' house. I've always worked in the garage until I filled it up. When I was 21, I got married. I was still in college. By the time I was 30, I was divorced. I was single, and during that time, I had lived at different locations around L.A., a couple years out in the Valley, a couple different locations, but I've always come back to Santa Monica.

PK: This house was, in effect, available to you. Is that right?

MM: Yes, because it was my grandparents' house and then my father inherited it and he was here. There was space, so I moved back here while I was in my bachelor days and just stayed. I lived my young manhood in reverse. However it works, okay?

PK: So you were working here.

MM: Working here. I was also traveling overseas. I started going to Australia probably in the mid '70s. I almost started up another life there. I mean I have friends there and I was thinking about moving there. Ultimately, I didn't move there, but still think about it occasionally. It's always nice to have an escape route.

PK: All right. I'm beginning to get the picture of where you were at a certain time, and through the '70s. When were you divorced?

MM: When was it, when I was 29 or 30.

PK: What, '77?

MM: That sounds about right. Let's say '77, I was cut loose.

PK: So you enjoyed much of the '80s and say part of the '70s as a bachelor. And you were living around in different places. What led you to the Valley, for instance?

MM: Well that was when I was married the first time. I was going to Northridge at the time and we rented a house. I'd just gotten married. I was like all of 21 years old. I knew it all, all the answers, so I was finishing up at Northridge and so we rented a little house. I still remember the address of that place, 18409 1/2 Hatchless Street in Tarzana.

PK: Tarzana.

MM: Tarzana, you may recall, was the home of Edgar Rice Burroughs. So anyhow, I had about an acre of land out there. It was great. It was the '60s, what can you say. My neighbor down the street had a marijuana hedge she grew. It was a very interesting time. It was the wild '60s at Northridge. It was the '60s, what can you say. Then later when I was in graduate school at UCLA, one of my professors from Northridge, he and his wife took a sabbatical, went to Europe for a year, and so, I rented his home/studio out in Encino on Louisa Avenue and that was really great because it had a workshop, little house, in the back of a big property. Encino is a very nice part of the Valley. There was a swimming pool, and it was amazing. It was just idyllic. I was there for about a year.

PK: But then you would come back here? Not when you were married?

MM: No, no. We had our own places then. Eventually, I would end up back here.

PK: What were you, a gypsy?

MM: Just about, yes. Well a lot of places have been torn down. Time marches on. So, yeah, like in the '71 earthquake, when was that, '73 earthquake?

PK: Well, I think it was '71.

MM: This is the one that hit and the veterans hospital collapsed out in Sepulveda. We were in a little frame house in Santa Monica. Everything was going back and forth and watching this. That was exciting. I'll never forget that one.

PK: Well how would you characterize your involvement with the art world? You were very young. Also, the

Vietnam War kept me in school, too. At one point, I was going to stop school, but the prospect of being shipped out to Vietnam didn't sound real appealing. A lot of my teachers kept saying, "Stay in school."

PK: Was Llyn Foulkes teaching there at that time?

MM: No. I missed Llyn when he was there, unfortunately. I wish I had had him as a teacher. He was an amazing painter and he was one of the people I really admired, he and Kienholtz and Westermann, people like that. I somehow could never get with the program with these minimalist people. I just felt totally left out and unengaged. So it was the more visceral artist that I felt more kinship with like Kienholz and the Beats, that whole interesting kind of collage assemblage movement Bruce Conner, people like that.

PK: At that time, you're -- we're talking about you were actually still in graduate school, just started out as an artist and you're married already and so what was your life like? Did it provide you opportunities to come into contact with any of these people you admired? Who did you hang out with? What did you guys do?

MM: Gosh, what did we do?

PK: Besides smoke dope.

MM: Well, everyone smoked dope then. We had a circle of friends, mostly other graduate students at UCLA.

PK: Mostly artists?

MM: Film makers and artists. By film makers, I mean underground film makers and documentarians. Like down on Third Street in Santa Monica was a whole hotbed of film makers at one time. It was kind of a strange cabal of peers, other graduate students and artists that were already working and stuff.

PK: Presumably, you and your buddies, male and female, would talk about what was happening. You come out of the '60s when there was a lot of excitement in L.A. What was your experience at that time?

MM: We used to go to visit the galleries on La Cienega when they were on La Cienega. That was an early experience. That's where I first saw Kienholz and Westermann and Diebenkorn was in the galleries and they had those Monday night late hours. They were great. So that was a lot of fun and interesting, then you go back to your studio and try to apply some bit of inspiration or whatever you're trying to find out.

PK: Well did you sit around at parties and talk about, the latest thing you read, an ArtForum or anything like that or what was happening in New York? I mean was there a careerist point to it?

MM: I had friends in school that were actually really into that stuff and it never engaged me that much. Talking about Ad Reinhardt and Jasper Johns and [Roy] Lichtenstein, and their work all reflected it, and I was just in another state, quite literally. No, we always looked at magazines and stuff, but at the time also, L.A.I.C.A. [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art] was kind of starting up and that was a very interesting kind of heady time. And it was, I think, a response to maybe the lack of responsiveness of the L.A. County Museum at the time to contemporary art. And so it grew out of a grass-roots kind of need to show. It was like a kunsthalle in some sense. There was a need there and it appeared because of a need, and at some point, it died, either because of the lack of that need or because it somehow had changed from its initial concept. But I can remember L.A.I.C.A. being very energetic, lots of energy went into that from a lot of the artists in Los Angeles at a time when it needed it. And it had wonderful exhibitions.

PK: You presumably knew of, Fidel Danieli?

MM: Oh, sure.

PK: And do you remember the show he did of the senior L.A. artist, and I would guess that that year was about '73, '74, in that Century City exhibition space?

MM: They had it over at the ABC Entertainment Center. They had a wonderful space over there that was donated to them until they developed a building.

PK: Do you remember that show or did you see that?

MM: I probably saw it, but I can't recall it to mind. Who was in it?

PK: Well, Hans Burkhardt, John McLaughlin, Florence Arnold, Larser Feitelson, Helen Lundeberg, and all the old timers

MM: I did see that.

PK: Because that, I think, was quite a story. Danieli was doing something that just simply hadn't been done before.

MM: Oh, it was amazing. It was like an open city as far as curators went because you drew anything you wanted here, and it was nobody looking over your shoulder at that time. I think it's changed now. I think he can't to that much anymore, and the whole climate is now so kind of corporate in the sense of establishment, that it's harder to do those kind of exhibitions, although I hope someone is trying.

PK: Did you feel that that was true for the artist as well?

MM: To a large extent, it was. There was a lot of enthusiasm at that time and kind of a total experimental attitude. A lot of us, I think, had no illusions about having an art career as far as making a real living off from being an artist, so a lot of us had other jobs, myself included, obviously, which, in a funny way, had a liberating effect on your work because you could then take those chances and experiment and try goofy ideas out and do outrageous things, and they were all done. And it was a very wonderful time of energy and experimentation, and having the venue of L.A.I.C.A. was very important, having a place to produce these strange things that either couldn't be collected or could, but no one would.

PK: Sort of as an aside, you know the Spences, Stuart and Judith?

MM: Yes.

PK: Were they already involved -- I mean I know they ended up much involved with L.A.I.C.A. As a matter of fact, the Archives just received some of the final L.A.I.C.A. records from them, but I'm just wondering if they were on the scene at that particular time?

MM: You mean earlier when it started? I don't remember them. They might have been, but I don't recall. I remember going to a meeting, I think it was at UCLA or some auditorium and it was when a lot of artists got together and it was the start of L.A.I.C.A., basically. I didn't start it personally, but the idea was presented to a group of artists, a large group, and it was kind of the kickoff for that and it flew for a while. Some of us would volunteer to help install exhibitions and it was like amateur theater in the sense that the actors also painted the scenery and built it and moved it around, so it was more of an egalitarian moment.

PK: Which served very well for quite a while until M.O.C.A. [Museum of Contemporary Art] came on the scene or was on the horizon, at least.

MM: L.A.I.C.A. changed. I've never really analyzed it, quite honestly. I don't know why it changed, but it did, and eventually, maybe it's social Darwinism, who knows, but it did some wonderful things during its vital years.

PK: Was there a particular exhibition perhaps or a program that caught your attention or maybe one in which you were involved?

MM: Well there were a number of programs. Llyn Foulkes did a wonderful exhibition at L.A.I.C.A. I think that's when I met Llyn in person. He came over to my studio which was the garage on the way there and picked out some work for this exhibition that he curated. There was another exhibition. It was a giant salon style show that Hal Glicksman did, called Collage Assemblage and it was an amazing exhibition. It was amazing; and he asked me to include my traveling mystery museum which was a whole installation by itself, I mean aside of his show, and they actually built a central hallway down the middle of the show and had a museum inside of that, so it was an amazingly rich compendium. That's where I met Wallace Berman at that exhibition. Unfortunately, it was just right before he was killed.

PK: That must have been what, in '73? [Wallace Berman died in 1976] Did you meet [George] Herms at that same time?

MM: I met George briefly in 1966 during my first trip to San Francisco to visit the hippies. I didn't know what hippies were. I was tagging along on a semester break with some friends, Jack Barth and Al Cramer, and they were driving up to San Francisco to visit Jack's girlfriend and Al was going along because he had some friends he wanted to see and I was tagging along in a Volkswagen beetle. We left from the Valley, and on the way up there, we had to make a brief stop in Topanga Canyon to pick up a shirt that George's wife had made for Al and it was full of stars and paisleys, and it was 1966. We drove up to this place called Haight- Ashbury to crash, whatever that meant. It was really funny. It was amazing. The concept of crashing was quite novel to me. Having grown up in this quiet Methodist household, but it was interesting, the raging hormones and lots of dope and incense and black lights and acid rock. I remember we actually crashed the Fillmore Auditorium and saw the Quicksilver Messenger Service and the Jefferson Airplane, and a host of others. It was wild. It was absolutely amazing.

PK: Well what did you think? I mean that was sort of a hey-day, I guess. We're already at the beginning of the

decline, I guess.

MM: I guess. It was November of 1966, and I had never seen that scene before. It was kind of amazing, truly amazing.

PK: Were you attracted to it or did you just find it curious?

MM: Well, part of me was repelled by it. I said, "What the hell is this?" It had an edge to it, but we were young and carefree and open to anything at that point. So it was a very interesting experience.

PK: When was the "Summer of Love," anyway? [1967]

MM: I think it was that summer, just at the apex, then the death of "Hippie." Then drugs moved in; murders and things. It got real nasty and the opportunistic element came in and that was it.

PK: How long did you stay there?

MM: We were only there for about a week and then we drove home. It was amazing. It was kind of astounding. We were at Berkeley and the Bay Area.

PK: So that was the kind of experience that was expanding your social horizons and perhaps lifestyle alternatives. Did it have any impact on you when you came back?

MM: I think that kind of anti-materialist esthetic was very big and I was certainly prone to agree with it at that time -- plus, the Vietnam War was going on. There was a lot to complain about. In a lot of ways, that was a very privileged position, too.

PK: You were pretty young still and impressionable?

MM: I was 20, something, not a seasoned old man yet. Come to think of it, I was 20 years old.

PK: Did that particular experience which was stimulated by encountering the counter-culture and meeting George Herms and others, maybe a decade later, consciously make you aware of this possible direction for your art?

MM: Well, I think it reinforced it. Certainly, seeing George and meeting Gordon Wagner, years earlier, studying with Hans Burkhardt in school, and in a funny way, he had influence, too. A lot of his paintings in that period were about death and decay and smoking. I remember having a couple of classes with him in which he would project these slides that he took in Mexico, on his trips to San Miguel de Allende, and a lot of these were photographs of open graves and bones and stuff. That was very romantic material to work with as a young artist.

[END SESSION #2, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN SESSION #3, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, this is continuing an interview with Michael C. McMillen. This is Session 3, Tape 1, Side A, and the date is December 8, 1997. The interviewer for the archives is Paul Karlstrom. The previous two sessions were held in your home. This time, we are in your studio. We're sitting in this clubhouse. Why don't you describe this studio where very few are allowed.

MM: On the second floor. This is the sanctum sanctorum. People want to come here. I don't let them. Only a few get up here. This is the chaos. This is the epicenter of the chaotic thought process.

PK: I want you to understand I appreciate it. And then you told me that there were special privileges that tended to this and one of them is that there were no girls.

MM: That was merely a nostalgic flashback to the early '50s, to the halcyon days of boyhood youth in California in the early '50s. The building is actually 600 square feet, but it has two floors, so it's really 1,200 square feet. I built this thing in 1983. It's a big garage, basically, with a kind of a giant loft upstairs. Downstairs is a machine shop. There're lathes down there, metal lathes, wood lathes, table saws, band saws, sanders. It's basically where I fabricate and do the physical work of building objects and the installation components. It's also, unfortunately, has to do duty as a storage area, hence, the intense, intense density of objects that are jammed hither and tither, hither and yon into every nook and cranny you can imagine down there, but it's very organized. I mean I can find things [Snaps fingers] like that.

PK: So you never move them around?

MM: Oh, no. I would lose them. The problem is I don't have any floor space, so for my large installations, I have to build in my head and on paper in terms of drawings, then, I make the parts and then move them out to the job site.

PK: so you don't really assemble the pieces so much here. Is that right?

MM: Well I assemble sculptures here. Smaller works, but room-size pieces, no way. The second floor of the studio, which is more luminous and light, with sky lights and windows, is where I do drawing and painting. Easels, multiple; one, two, three, four easels; brushes and oil paints; a small library and other things; filing cabinets for my drawings and etchings; frames waiting for paintings; and artifacts from other installations.

PK: Including a wonderful submarine up on the wall there.

MM: All made out of something else. In other words, it's made out of funnels, coffee machines, toys, and shelves from the library, so everything in that submarine had a previous life as something else. A previous function which has now been subverted and twisted

PK: What's the date for that piece?

MM: Mid-1985, I think. I'm not sure.

PK: What is it called?

MM: It's called *Journey to the Surface*, and it was a focal object in this installation that I did in San Diego at a place called Installation on Fifth Avenue in 1985. It was part of a much greater walk-in installation. It was quite a nice piece, actually.

PK: But the whole show is for you? It was a one-person show?

MM: It was a single work. That was one element in the whole installation, but it's a stand-alone piece as well. A lot of times, I will incorporate other objects, other single works, and bring them together to work in concert sometimes, so I reserve the right to do that. It's like Mike's Pool Hall that was in Inner City, that originally was a stand-alone work which I later incorporated into Inner City, and I now have it back as a single work.

PK: Where is that?

MM: Inner City is now at its new home in Glasgow, Scotland, at the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art on Queen Street.

PK: And now does it include, Mike's Pool Hall?

MM: It includes Mike's Pool Hall, Mark 2. I did a second one, not a copy of the first one, but a copy only in terms of the dimensions of the room to fit the scale of the piece, but I redesigned a whole new pool hall for them. It was quite beautiful, and I was really sad to learn that the piece had been vandalized. Someone went in there and put their fist through the storefront of the miniature building. I've gotten photographs and reports back. It looks pretty awful.

PK: But they're leaving it on display?

MM: I think they have it closed down right now. It's just very odd, so I'm waiting to hear from them to see if they want me to go back and fix it, or if they want to have someone there to try to fix it. It is always discouraging when people do that; vandalize your art work, although I've been very fortunate. It rarely happens to me.

PK: It's an act of vandalism, but one of the things that's attractive about your art work is the playfulness that the elements actually are models, toys, not that you would want to break them.

MM: Well I guess they are. They're toy-like in the sense of them being of a different scale we're used to looking, and so we think of them as toys.

PK: But you usually don't want to destroy, well, I don't know. Kids -- unfortunately, another side of human nature is to destroy.

MM: Destroy, yes. I remember as a kid taking all my model airplane collection and sacrificing it to a pack of firecrackers, over a number of summers. I must say, not in any kind of personal offense, but I was not unique in doing that. A lot of my friends -- we shared a common passion. I think it came from being in at the tail end of World War II and growing up with a lot of John Wayne movies and that kind of theatrical violence that you see in the cinema. The excitement of explosions and acting out of what we saw in the movies.

PK: Do you feel you then surrounded yourself with the raw material of your work? Are you stimulated by this environment?

MM: Yes, very much.

PK: Do you make new connections when you look around sometimes?

MM: Constantly, but I must say, I have a love/hate relationship with my environment. Part of me loves – delights -- in the materiality of this kind of strange century. In other words, if you look around, you see thousands of items like books and all kinds of things, and I derive a lot of stimulation from these objects. They intrigue me, but I keep seeing metaphors and making associations with an objects. The other part of me envies -- I can think back to when the studio was new and it was empty and it was beautiful in its simplicity, so I wish I had two studios, this same building again. I'd have one empty and this one. I'd have a bridge on the second plank and walk back and forth. It would depend on how my mind was at the time.

PK: Would you walk over, do you think, to kind of clear your mind maybe if it was too much stimulation?

MM: To meditate, yeah. It's nice to kind of chill out sometimes.

PK: Is that a working method for you anyway? I mean do you just go away from this?

MM: Oh, I have to. It stimulates me. What I do to think clearly is I bicycle. I get on my bicycle and I just go somewhere, and it doesn't have to very far. I can go a few miles and it does wonders. There's something about the solitude of flying on a bicycle that's quite wonderful, and I'll take a notebook with me and just make little notes, and it's wonderful, then I come back and I'm ready to work. I've got files of notes and things I've kept over the years. Not all of them get built, obviously, and a lot of them are a visual process of thinking through ideas where you make sketches and you modify things or reject things or you free-associate words or phrases and text. So I'm always taking notes and making doodles, and every so often, one of them seems to be worthy of the pursuit, and then I will get into that more. That's kind of how I work.

PK: Has this always been the case or is this something you developed over time?

MM: I think it's developed. I didn't when I was a kid, but I always kept notes. Even before I was an artist, I kept notes of things that interested me, and even to where -- I used to cruise the alleys frequently on my bicycle. That was part of my meditation. That's how I found my stuff, too. So it had two functions. One was as a scavenger scout for myself; I could find interesting stashes of material that were interesting; and the other was just a way of clearing my head and just kind of being alone, no telephones, no one to talk to. Alleys are much the underrated streets, in my opinion. They're so interesting in their character, and there's no traffic. That's how I found this stuff. So what I'm saying is that these objects actually came out of a box I found in the alley. It belonged to one of my neighbors a few blocks over who had been in the Army Air Corps stationed in China in World War II, and here, this guy, his name was Ackerman and he had this kind of exciting part of his life as a young man and then, apparently, a fairly boring rest of his life after World War II. Number three is Maurice Ackerman. That was him as a young man. He's dead now, I think.

PK: And he was your neighbor?

MM: I never knew him, but all this stuff came out of a box of his personal effects that somebody put out.

PK: He had died, though?

MM: He had died or he went to a rest home, and someone brought his things out and I found this and I said, "I can't let this go to the dump," so I took it home, and slowly, I went through these things. I looked at them and I found all kinds of strange items like postcards and photographs and old notes and things.

PK: Look at this. This is the MSA News ...

MM: Mine-safety plant's company.

PK: What is that?

MM: In '46, it was after the war. He must have worked for them, so this probably is his first job he had after he got out of the service at the end of World War II. They used to manufacture mine-safety appliances like breathing masks and helmets, things like that. I used to buy their products, dust masks.

PK: And they kept them after the war for other purposes?

MM: Oh yes. This is for the mining industry. So it went on through the war and after the war. A lot of these guys,

I bet, were returned servicemen.

PK: But you obviously enjoy keeping these things and it's like layers of something building up around here.

MM: I think it's kind of a connection with my early beginnings which started at around that time. I was born in 1946. A lot of my neighbors had been war veterans and the economy of Santa Monica had been pretty much based around Douglas Aircraft when they were here. I was telling you earlier, my brother gave me an old Navy foot locker that was given to him by a widow up in the Ojai Valley. He had helped her clean out her garage and she gave him this trunk of her husband's career. He'd been a Navy pilot, and it's the most extraordinary collection of things. His uniforms are in there, all his papers, letters home, his pilot's logbook when he was learning how to fly in the air fields around California. He was in the Pacific in the Navy and there are newspaper accounts of his aircraft carrier being sunk by Kamikazes, amazing stuff. This guy was in his early twenties. After the war, what does he do? He works for Standard Oil or Shell Oil until he retires, and then he dies. It's this real high kind of real human drama and then flat for the rest of his life. I mean maybe I'm not being fair to the guy, but that's how I see it. But here's this trunk of these artifacts that are kind of a piece of history. I guess I see them as historical artifacts and a bit of history that I have some connection to by proximity.

PK: So you said that among the activities that takes place here or the collections that you have acquired, that there is this sense of an archaeological endeavor especially, relating to the World War II period.

MM: Right. I'm fascinated by history and especially art history because it's something I've had more direct contact with through people I've known or talked to. It's the time that I grew up in. It was all around us, and it really shaped the last part of the 20th Century and continues to.

PK: Do these objects you have like that German for one thing...

MM: I got this when I was a little kid. I was 11 years old and what I'm holding in my hand is a steel German helmet from World War I. You can still see the camouflage pattern that was painted on it, probably by the owner. It's a classic German helmet. It looks very Teutonic in its design. This was found by my great-uncle, Ernest, who had been in the 69th Ohio Infantry. It was an Army outfit over in France and he brought this back as a souvenir. It was given to me by my cousin. It was up in an old attic in 1957 and she said, "Ah, Michael, I don't want that; take it away," so I found this treasure and brought it home and I've had it ever since.

PK: Are you interested in the part of the history of these objects that involves their coming into your life, not that they're just historical artifacts that had meaning exclusively in connection with their use and with the owner, but they, in fact, continue a journey on their own and that has led them to you and your studio? Do you think of it that way?

MM: Oh very much. They're all time markers. They were probably built around 1914, and here it is in 1997 sitting in a studio in California. Now how did it go from manufactured somewhere in Germany to France where it was lost, we don't know how, but it was acquired in France. From there, it went to West Virginia where it sat in an attic for half a century, and then I took it back to California as a kid. And I kind of rediscovered it [because] I haven't seen it for years and I found it the other day in a box. So this is funny, a hop-scotch of this object around the planet from Germany to California, spanning almost 80 years. To me, that's poetic. There's something there. I don't know what it is, but that stimulates me. Those kinds of unlikely connections really excite me. There's a poetry there that I'm always trying to kind of get to, but I can't quite.

PK: Presumably, that is the poetic element that you seek in your own work, the work itself comes out of this possibility of bringing these different things together with their different stories.

MM: I'm always trying to synthesize a new story out of old stories. Like that piece that's over on the table, there's what appears to be a miniature barracks building. It's about 18 inches long, about 12 inches wide, about 13 inches high, and I designed it after going down to Fort MacArthur and photographing the old barracks buildings that are still standing down there. It's going to be part of an installation called I Dream Of Your Eye that I'll be doing at the end of January in the art gallery at the College of the Sequoias. And I made three identical buildings and they're going to be on these platforms that sit on the ground, and inside the gallery will be a large weather balloon, inflated, and being suspended on a column of air, floating in space. On its surface will be projected a whole series of macro shots of human eyes, and the gallery is dark, so there's this large orb-like -- if you're paranoid, you probably shouldn't go to the gallery, but it sounds interesting to me.

At the foot of this large orb are these three platforms that have these three buildings on it, and the buildings are hinged. The platform is covered with an earth-colored carpet, so it's comfortable, and the buildings are all hinged so they can fold them up, lay down, and lower them over your own head, and once inside, you are no longer in the gallery. There's a small speaker in each building, so there's an audio component that you'll be hearing and I'm going to have some old factory elements inside each building, too. And at one point, I'm planning to have the flanking buildings occupied by nude figure models, a male and a female, on either side so

the person can then take the position in the middle and enter the strange world. They're full size, real people. I'm not sure exactly how to describe it. I think it will make people feel somewhat uncomfortable. I don't want this kind of edge to happen with the people. Here's this big eye looking at you and it's naked people and you're in this kind of strange place, almost like a bird, an ostrich, a pentagram, and I think it's going to work. I haven't done this piece before, but I think it's going to work. It's going to transfer the viewer someplace else.

PK: Transformation.

MM: Yeah. I'm always trying to combine things that don't necessarily go together in ways that they do.

PK: So seeking somehow over and over again a new experience.

MM: Right, trying to find new experiences using maybe old symbols. Like these buildings, they're not modern buildings. They're very they're very generic, but they're very old-fashioned buildings, too, and maybe that's a commentary about regimentation or about how we're all the same on some level. I don't know. I mean there're lots of metaphors in this piece and I don't even know myself yet the extent to which I am seeing them, but as I work through pieces, they start coming out. They speak to me.

PK: When did this idea come to you?

MM: I was invited to do this exhibition and they had no money, which is often the case, unfortunately, and I said, "Well, how can I activate this space and really have a very memorable experience, but do it on a shoestring budget?" The idea out of the blue came from my childhood, going back to that. When I was a little kid, my grandmother used to take me down to Sears to do shopping, Sears & Roebuck it was called then. We would walk past the homewares. Down in the basement, they have their vacuum display going and one of their things was having a vacuum cleaner, a Kenmore probably, with a pipe hanging vertically, and then floating in space was a beach ball. They were using a principle from physics called [Daniel] Bernoulli's principle and it basically has to do with air and pressure. What was happening was that this beach ball was being suspended by the low-pressure area above it created by the air swirling around it. So, basically, the air was holding the balloon up, and I'm going to re-use that same principle, only hold up a weather balloon, a really giant beach ball, maybe eight, ten feet in diameter, inside this gallery, which will then come like a projection surface for these eyes. So as you see, I'm tapping back to many years in the past to come forward into the future to create something that will have meaning for people now.

[END SESSION #3, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION #3, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: Continuing our interview on December 8th with Michael C. McMillen. This is Tape 1, Side B, and we were just being given a little lesson on the Bernoul -- what's the name of the principle?

MM: I think it's Bernoulli's principle, he was an Italian physicist. So the name of the piece is I Dream Of Your Eye. Note I didn't say eyes, but eye singular, and that was quite deliberate because I wanted to give it kind of a twist. Eyes sound too romantic, whereas eye singular sounds weird. It sounds disturbed almost. I mean it really focuses on the fact that it is an eye and not eyes which I think are quite different. The piece touches on kind of voyeurism, paranoia, how we feel about privacy issues of personal space, public space, so these are all kind of issues that I wanted to kind of bring together and put them in the crucible of the gallery and see what happens.

PK: Have you ever read -- there's a very weird, very strange story by George Bataille called The Story of the Eye.

MM: No. Oh, singular, interesting.

PK: You might want to check it out. It's pretty disturbing. It's really out there, sadomasochistic and this sort of thing, but, of course, it's a great favorite. It's considered sort of a brilliant work by -- well, the surrealists were much influenced.

MM: Oh yeah. I think of that film with the sliced eye.

PK: If course, there's no connection between that and your work.

MM: Well it's a fascinating -- the eye certainly historically has always been seen as the window to the soul and all the other associations that it has in the history of literature. In this piece, I don't have any intent of investigating sadomasochism, per se, although that's certainly possible that someone could have an experience like that if they were thinking of those things. There are a lot of ways you can achieve that and I might ask the question, "Why do you want to achieve it anyway? Why do we make art?" I think we make it because we want to see something that doesn't already exist. That's partly why I like to investigate questions I have about things and about assumptions that we have in our culture, just personal things that I would be curious about experiencing.

Somehow, the art allows me to experiment in these areas and to explore these ideas without using writing or film-making. By physically engaging the audience, inviting them -- it's also up to their option to either participate or not at different degrees. They can walk in the gallery and look and walk out, or they walk in the gallery and they can actually lie down on the platform, put the building over their head and really get into it. So the choice is up to the viewer. I'm not going to twist anybody's arm. I make it; I put it there, and it's up to them to complete the circle. I kind of like it that way.

PK: When is this piece going to be installed there?

MM: It's going to be installed at the College of the Sequoias in Visalia, on the 29th of January. It's a community college. I'm doing a lecture also.

PK: There are so many directions to go with all of this. You have what some people would -- I certainly don't feel this way, I find it rich, but some might, especially downstairs, find it claustrophobic.

MM: Let me tell you something. I do, too. I hate downstairs right now. It's at that point where it reminds me that I failed to maintain order. It's in my face, and it drives me crazy because I feel like I need the objects, for one aspect of my work, but at the same time, they're inhibiting me from doing other pieces, so I'm in this real dilemma. At the same time, I know that at one point, I will make the phone call, in comes the dumpster, and out goes surplus. So I do it periodically.

PK: So you do weed it and edit it.

MM: Every so often, I guess even I get up to here and I say, "Basta, that's it; that's out of here. I haven't used it in 10 years, let someone else have it," I usually give the stuff away or toss it out.

PK: But some things I get the feeling you wouldn't do that to even though you don't actually use them or look at them for a couple years, like that helmet. There's no way that would ever go away.

MM: No, no. That's something real special. That has manna in it, some kind of magic in it. It's got a history of provenance. It needs to be around. It's talking to us. That's how I look at these things; they talk to me. I hope you don't think I'm a psychotic, but the objects, they speak, not -- maybe not in English, but there's information to be learned from them. They inform me somehow which helps me with my work. It's like a farmer who gets paid for his crop. I plop right back in to the next year's crop. It goes right back into the grist mill. That's how I think of how these things help me with my work.

PK: There are just different things that clearly are here because, well, they represent something special to you. You have a relationship with them and this isn't very odd because most of us build our little collections of our stuff.

MM: I think we all have a tendency to have things. Even, I've noticed, people on the street collect things. There's this amazing woman in Santa Monica that I've seen for years, who has like a train of little shopping carts all tied together and they are filled with these bags of God knows what and this is her little world. She pushes this with great effort on her part all around the city. In the rain, shine; she's always out there with her things. She lives on the street, quite literally. So I think there's some kind of human impulse to collect. Someone has to tell me when to stop. That's why they build museums, I guess.

PK: I guess, though, we, to a certain extent, do achieve an identity or establish an identity by those things that we choose to surround ourselves with, even if it's just a few things that even if they're not valuable, like the woman out on the street or -- you see all these people with their shopping carts, homeless often, sometimes very disturbed, mentally ill people, but they're clearly not without identity or sense of self because they have their stuff.

MM: One of my favorite street people is a guy, I don't know his name, but he looks old enough to be like a World War II vet, possibly, or Korean War certainly. I see this guy walking every day, for years now, and he's the most amazing. I call him a folk artist. He makes objects out of rubber and plastic and his palette is green and black. He has made costumes out of Arrowhead bottles, and visors out of soda pop bottles, strange leggings made out of inner tubes wrapped around his legs, and strange-like grids that he looks at the world through. He doesn't talk to anybody, but he walks back and forth. He's made truly amazing objects. He is a sculpture. He doesn't know it perhaps, but he is. He's so focused. His identity is so strong that he is unique.

PK: Have you photographed him?

MM: I've never ever felt like intruding on his space like that. I probably should, but he's amazing.

PK: Thinking of the term "identity" through something beyond yourself, how are you able to establish an

identity?

MM: For me, my work is pretty much a lot of my identity. I mean I live to work, basically. With money I'm able to earn I don't put into clothes especially or things like that. I use it as a way of buying time to work. That's how I see money for me. It represents time to be by myself working on these ideas. So in that sense, the work is kind of a surrogate religion, maybe not so surrogate, maybe it is part religion.

PK: But it just struck me, without reiterating what we just said, that that all of us exist in so many different ways and choose ways in which we want to present ourselves perhaps through art, but through things we make or things that we choose, even dress in, of course, that's very obvious.

MM: Well I agree. I can't make things I don't feel passionately about. I've never been able to. Years ago when I was going through college, I was trying to earn some extra money by making motel paintings and it was the hardest work I've ever done in my life, psychically. It was just torture. I was in it for my mother on top of that, who was an interior designer, and she and I had actually di-pole taste in what art was. I desperately needed this money and was biting the bullet and being the "art whore", or whatever you want to call it, it's called survival. It was just the toughest work I've ever had to do and, consequently, I cannot make things I really don't feel strongly about. If I lose the spark, I stop working on something, and that's not to say that I don't let things lapse over years before I go back to finish them, because I do. Things kind of cook at their own speed, but I feel strongly about these objects.

I want to create objects that will stimulate the viewer in ways that I am stimulated by these objects. Now that's an ideal situation and the artist has no control over what his audience is going to think, but they can try to communicate some quality, some poetry through the work and just hope that the viewer has something in the vicinity of a similar experience. You never know. It's so subjective, but that's okay, too. I don't need to control the mind of my viewer. Now this might sound contradictory because I want to make these installations set up an environment that will produce a certain kind of experience in the viewer, but beyond a certain point, I take hands off and leave it up to chance and personal experience. So maybe it's a marriage of control and no control we're talking about where the artist produces the artifact or the environment and then walks away from it, and the second half of the equation is the viewer and their personal history and how they feel about what they're experiencing. And that's kind of how I see art as functioning for me.

PK: Well certainly, some art is more clearly of that nature than others. It's hard for me, at least, to see most minimalism in those same terms, but I can conceive of these individual pieces as markers of your progress through life.

MM: They are! I frequently will put my age when I build a piece into the piece, maybe as a numeral, like 51 or 49 or something. I even mark my tools when I buy them. I'll write the date on them. It's a regular personal fetish, but I like doing that. In fact, I even have tools of other artists and they're very precious to me. I have a little hammer that Hans Burkhardt used to own. I also bought from Gordon Wagner's widow, his machinist tools because Gordon worked as a machinist engineer. I love the idea of carrying on some kind of tradition using some of the artifacts from people that touched my life. They're a continuum, too. I still use my father's tools and some of my grandfather's tools. There's a very romantic streak in me as I'm sure you're aware. I confess, I'm a romantic, but I like the idea.

PK: There are worse things ...

MM: There're worse things, right. That's something that a person maybe wouldn't know about me necessarily, but to me, the fact that one of my works was built with one of these tools somehow connects it in a funny way in the continuum of history with both historical things and these individual people that I used to know, who are now gone.

PK: We talked about George Herms, and then a few others. Interestingly enough, he doesn't describe it as a mess or as random or junk or anything like that; he describes it as an archive. It's the George Herms archives. And so that suggests that each object is a document of something, and then also has potential for an extended life.

MM: It's possible.

PK: That's very interesting. Let's move this on just a little bit, not jumping too far a field, but in terms of the work as an autobiography, would you say that most of the things that are important to you in your life are the things that occupy your mind or even maybe obsess you? Do you feel at one time or another they take form, reified somehow in your work?

MM: I think so. That piece at the garage at the County Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art], Central Meridian, that's very much autobiographical of me as well as of the invisible persona that it seems to depict as a

portrait. That garage is based on my neighbor Strickfaden's garage, my grandfather's garage, and other places I've been in. The genesis of the piece, the model for it, if you will, was really kind of an Egyptian tomb. That was kind of the parallel metaphor I was thinking about when I was making the piece in 1981. I was trying to do a portrait of Los Angeles in addition to a single person and I saw the car as this kind of funereal barge that one would find in the catacombs of a pyramid. Only at the museum, the car was up on this dais, with this kind of cryptic writing around the base, a bench to the future, centi-meridian, and self and anti-self, which was a reference to kind of a home-spun mysticism. So the garage is full of these artifacts for the afterlife, or you could read retirement which is the afterlife in this culture.

So that's kind of a metaphor and humor in the piece, is it's comparing the garage as architecture and as repository for the afterlife in our culture with the Egyptian concept of the afterlife. You have your wealth with you and the things you're going to take with you in the next whatever. So it was kind of an ironic commentary on what is the afterlife. Why don't we live our life now? What's so good about retirement? I think it sucks, myself.

PK: It's not unlike what you described earlier with -- I can't remember if you mentioned his name, but the fellow who had this traumatic war experience and then went to work for the oil company.

MM: Oh, yeah, Mr. Ackerman. Oh, I'm sorry, that was someone else. Oh yeah, the Navy flyer. In fact, at my wedding to Tracy, I wore the trousers of his dress uniform. They were in perfect condition. They fit me perfectly. They were amazing.

PK: Okay. Tell me why you did that.

MM: It is kind of unusual. There's something kind of wonderful about it because here was this guy's Navy uniform, had been in a trunk for 50 years. His wife got rid of it. It was going to be destroyed, and here's this pair of these pants. It's amazing! They were beautifully tailored, black wool, with very fine satin stripe on the legging, and they fit me perfectly. It was uncanny. It was amazing.

PK: Did you read meaning into that in a sense?

MM: I said, "Well, this is consistent," so I accepted the event and I wore these.

PK: Did others comment on your fine attire?

MM: They said, "Great pants, where did you get them?" I said, "You won't believe me. They came out of a Navy foot locker from a garage in Ojai Valley." I still have them. It's like this stuff are little time capsules that come my way every so often. If I win the lottery, I'd probably buy another building and take all these objects and make cases for them and spread them out and see what they are. Even my first installation, The Traveling Mystery Museum, was a collection of artifacts, although in that case, the artifacts were all manufactured, but in a funny way, I'm very consistent over the years as it would appear if I look back.

PK: Do you know Clayton Bailey?

MM: I know of him. I've never met him.

PK: Well he has this place up in Port Costa [California]. He describes his work in similar terms, although I don't see really much of a connection necessarily with you, but the idea of this museum of unusual things or of oddities or of special things with a sense of mystery about them. This is a whole way of looking at the world. It might be even, in a sense, curatorial, admittedly very imaginative, a creative curatorial, taking many liberties.

MM: Lots of liberties; lots of liberties. I've often thought about that in a funny way. What is a curator? What is a museum? Those are questions I always muse about every so often.

[END SESSION #3, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN SESSION #3, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PK: Continuing this third interview session with Michael C. McMillen on December 8, 1997. This is Tape 2, Side A.

I like this theme of art as autobiography that's emerged as we've been talking, and I certainly don't want to nudge it too much or force it too much in that direction, but it seems right to me, and as long as you feel comfortable with it. One of the things that I would ask, and it's not necessarily obvious in your work, but we have our erotic self, the sensual, and the sexual as an important part of -- well, let's face it -- most people's lives and experience, and if we agree that that's the case, given the nature of your work and its capacity to incorporate or display these different sides of you. Is there any way that you feel your sexuality may emerge in your work at times obviously, or in some cases not so obvious?

MM: Yes, it's there, frequently enjoins itself in drawings and stuff. How can one escape it? I mean it's such a driving force in the human psyche, so I try to acknowledge it and somehow and incorporate it either architecturally or with drawings or paintings, not maybe in a directly illustrative manner, perhaps, but if you look at it, it's usually there somehow, like strange forms that tunnels and who knows. Like this one right over here. A tiny, nice, little oil painting, I did that in one night, and so I just kind of boned, teetering on the brink of this orifice or hole in the ground.

PK: Yeah, very subtle.

MM: Maybe not. It depends how we look at these things.

PK: But do these to indulge this playful side of you -- for fun?

MM: It should be fun. Art should be fun. Art is a lot of work, but then work doesn't have to not be fun.

PK: I was wondering, if incorporating nudes can be seen within that particular impulse doing the work and this little piece that we've looking at now certainly could have among its many meanings the erotic. I saw there's a piece right over here. Now look at that, I can't help but notice that you have the phallic imagery. What's it called?

MM: Well the actual name of the piece is called Nuestra Nosteratu, "Our Vampire." This thing is about 10 feet high, [it]has a very detailed interior. It's very funny because to look inside it, put your face in there you're in genital area of the sculpture. This object is in a private collection

PK: It does look like kind of a robotic figure.

MM: Oh, it is. It's definitely an architect type, kind of robotic architecture. For our radio visitors the piece looks like it could be a robot standing up or a building in the shape of a robot, and the stairs leading to the front door definitely have a phallic association with storage tanks next to it back there, and so there's this funny kind of visual you can ponder or reference system.

PK: It's like a blueprint, I guess, a working drawing and the stairway that seems to be the penis.

MM: Yes, it's a working drawing. That would be the ark.

PK: And you draw the ark showing the possibility for erection.

MM: It can be raised or lowered, depending...

PK: It's very interesting because one doesn't usually think of these non-living constructions as embodying our sexuality or desire, I guess, one word to use there. That moves in to the realm that we usually disassociate or from buildings, for that matter, because as you said, this is like a robot or a building, right?

MM: Well this drawing and piece, in fact, were done around '84, and I was doing a whole series of works that centered around anthropomorphic architecture. I did a series of masks that people are familiar with, and this was an extension of that investigation in which I built the whole building from foundation to radio tower on top of it. It's a miniature building. It's about 10 feet tall, and it looks like kind of a weird tenement building, but again, in the shape of a gigantic kind of a robot, and I'm sure it's a commentary about modern culture, and maybe the humanizing aspects of architecture.

PK: You also did paintings that can be very playful in that same way. For instance, the one that, grew out of that postcard that we sent from Italy.

MM: Oh, right. You sent me a postcard from Italy of -- I think it was a detail of Giotto's [Ambrogio Bondone] fresco of St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata. And so I blatantly lifted that little image and repainted him instead of wearing humble brown robes, bright crimson robes, and so in getting the Stigmata, he is seen kneeling next to a vegetable garden in which there is an enormous watermelon growing at his knees, and across this schism on the other side of the road are two females, both pointing, one would assume, accusingly, at him. One of them is a rather large haus frau type, is wearing a blue frock and she's pointing a garden hose at him which, at the moment, is not squirting, just aiming this object at him, which is phallic, could be phallic, could be? And next to her is a disrobed a woman of ample proportions, could be her daughter; we don't know, who happens to be holding a berretta, a 9-millimeter berretta at him, so he's about to receive a different kind of stigmata. And the painting is quite wonderful if I do say so myself. It borrows on a lot of the style of the quarto cento painting in that kind of naive perspective, a goofy perspective which I still love because of its expressive power and lack of logic. So it is a funny, small painting. It's only I think about 12 inches square, but within it is a whole world going on of -- it's called The Parable of a Melon. Now we're never privy to what the parable actually is. It's really left up to the viewer's own imagination to fill in the blanks, but it's an evocative little painting that kind of both honors

and maybe dishonors our history at the same time and other institutions that shall remained un-named.

PK: But it is interesting, your paintings are very much honoring tradition, and I'm thinking in terms of facility and skill and technique, drawing and creating a surface very much in an academic realist mode has come down, well from early Netherlandish painting, particularly that's the closest thing.

MM: Some of my favorites I think were the Van Eykes and -- I love their work. When I go to museums, that's usually the first area I head for. Obviously, Hieronymus Bosch is a wonderful painter, and [Pieter] Bruegel certainly, so I'm very much enamored with that period of painting. It was a representational painting, but it was not a photograph. It had motive qualities that were quite different than the photograph. I admire and respect the skill that those guys had, amazing. I was not trained that way. Most of my contemporaries were not trained that way. In fact, in the Bastards Group, none of us were trained that way. A lot of us were self-trained. That's one of the common threads of the group is a lot of us were self-trained.

PK: Well let's talk about the Bastards, because that was the next question I was going to ask you.

MM: Good segue.

PK: I'm very interested in how the group got together, what it means to you, how you interact, and maybe you can start by telling about the show.

MM: Well it was an exhibition recently at Hunsaker-Schlesinger Gallery. It was simply called Bastards: Individual and Collaborative Works, and I think there were six of us in the show. There was John Frame, Jon Swihart, Peter Zokosky, F. Scott Hess, Steve Galloway, and myself. That's six. The idea grew out of this informal get-together every so often at John Frame's studio during which we would draw from the model. Now how's that for an anachronism in the 1990s?

PK: Why not?

MM: Check out the babes, right? We know why artists do that. It's the male gaze. It was a good time to get together and I think this thing grew out of that. A lot of us had discussed issues of how critics seemed to focus on certain kinds of artwork and seemed to ignore others. So out of these meetings grew this idea for an exhibition and the gallery was approached and they were very excited about it. A year went by and we slowly got into it, working on the pieces. It was a wonderful gamble because none of us knew what we had. We knew the show was coming up, the deadline was there. I don't think anybody jumped on it right away, but slowly we got our momentum up and did our work. We just sort of organically paired off with other people in the group that we wanted to work with and none of us knew until the morning the show was hung what we had. I mean it could have been a major flop, but it wasn't. It was quite the opposite. It was a wonderful synthesis of our different styles of painting, and there was some sculpture, too, but the bulk of the show was paintings.

PK: How exactly did it work? Some of the works were real collaborations of several of you. How did that come about?

MM: It was this, oh, by gosh, by golly. It was funny. I think everyone expressed an initial interest in wanting to work with one or two other people initially, and sometimes that was how far it would go. Other times, it would kind of go from A to B to C to D, so the last guy that got it dealt with what he was given. So there was a lot of trust involved and a willingness to take a chance and to be experimental. All of us worked as individuals on a regular basis and this was a chance to change the rules a little bit and see what collaboration would do. In fact, it was quite successful for us in terms of an experience and we're in the process of continuing our meetings and trying to propose that this be expanded to something a bit grander.

PK: You mean in terms of the exhibition?

MM: Another exhibition.

PK: But a grander exhibition?

MM: New works, bigger. We're talking maybe installation, "really big," something that you walk into. We have a meeting on Wednesday morning, to that effect. So who knows, this might go somewhere.

PK: When did you first get together?

MM: It was a number of years ago.

PK: So this has been going on for quite a while?

MM: Well they'd be together at John's every week and I was an erratic attendee. For different reasons, I could

only get there so often, but every so often, I do get there and we always have a good time when we get together and share ideas and talk about stuff. We had a number of interesting groups in museums come through the gallery. We did talks for them. There seemed to be a real resonance with the audience with the work in the exhibition. They had amazing attendance at the gallery. Word had gotten out and it was amazing.

PK: That was a wonderful show. I mean I liked it very much.

MM: Well thanks. We were all quite happy at the way it came out, pleasantly surprised, I would add, because we didn't know. Honestly, we had no idea. It was like, "Gee, let's take a chance," and we did and it paid off.

PK: Well, do you like the idea of rather than emphasizing whole notion of individuality and originality, downplaying that a bit in a work where sometimes it's quite difficult to see?

MM: There were a number of pieces like that in the show. They were quite successful and that was the part of the joy was that people couldn't tell, and that engaged the viewer. The fact that they were trying to see who was doing what and somehow it was unified to where you had to accept it as the word "bastard." Who's the father? We don't know.

PK: Do you think you learn from one another?

MM: I think so. You learn working with other personalities working styles. We're all quite different in a funny kind of way. We're working different styles. Not just stylistically in not only the way we paint, but working modes are different. It was a fascinating experiment, and also, a demonstration of mutual trust and respect because we didn't have this ego battle going on trying to outshine each other. It wasn't a contest of who's the winner. It was a win-win situation where we all advanced from the experience and gained from it.

PK: Do you have any thoughts about the nature of being an artist and perhaps even the romantic notion of working in isolation where originality is the greatest thing?

MM: Right now, that word, the "a" word, the appropriation word, comes to mind. There's a trend towards lifting images from art - "raiding" art history, basically. I did it. I don't do it all the time, not that directly, but it's there. I think a lot of students getting out of certain art schools haven't been trained properly. I think a lot of them come out being articulate in terms of talking about ideas, but a lot of them really have a hard time actually making art. That's very frustrating if you have ideas and you can't do it. I mean unless you become a writer instead.

A lot of the moves have been made. How do you redo de Kooning when he's already been done by de Kooning? That must be awfully frustrating. Now, the people in the Bastards Group were all painting figurative and it's surreal and other qualities, and there's a whole history behind that, too.

: It's [art] a strategy for communicating something, whether it's cynical or positive, whatever, it's a way of doing it. It's just that there're a lot of choices. Art, at one point, was just painting sculpture. I started making installations 25 years ago, now, that is a broad subject. There are a lot of people doing that now, so it seems to be opening up in this amazing front. You've got computers and you got Iris Printing, and photography has now been accepted as a fine art medium, so there's an amazing spectrum of areas where you can experiment with your ideas. It's like having too many choices is worse than having none at all. I mean you almost get stalled out because you don't know which way to go. It's like not having any limits. Limits are very important in life, and if you don't have them, often people sit there and they don't know where to go. They're stymied by the whole situation. There's too much freedom. I don't keep up with the art world. It's out there and if I did that too much, I wouldn't get my own work done. So I look at it every so often, "Oh, yeah, oh, okay," and go back to work. Life isn't that long. You got to do what you can when you have it.

PK: The idea of working or the resurgence of realism is a pretty interesting subject because we watched it happen.

MM: Oh yeah, the minimalist thing and then the Pop came in. It's fascinating to watch this "sign-wave" swing through the whole spectrum from figurative and the Abstract Expressionism and then minimalist and that was kind of a cul-de-sac, and they went back to all the isms that followed ad infinitum. I'm sure it will come again. It just seems to be like a "wave theory" of art history. If you wait long enough, it comes back. Stuff gets recycled through the system through a body of art and it comes out in another manifestation down the road eventually.

PK: Well maybe, in part it's the change that art is not entirely self-referential, whereas at one time, that seemed to be. We were told, that ...

MM: Right, Mr. [Clement] Greenberg, et al.

PK: Exactly, and it seems remarkable, that which held such sway for our thinking, has really evaporated, and what it did was open up this world where a whole inventory of different forms, of different expressions, were available, and you go shopping a bit wherever you can find the most useful images or elements to express ideas. What if there are no real ideas to put these elements, forms, images, marks?

MM: Well without ideas, you have decoration. I think that's one of the differences between the concept behind work and a purely decorative object.

PK: Even if the methodology seems very sophisticated and current then?

MM: Possibly. If you look at art history, you look at its function, what is the function of art anyway? Why did they [palaeolithic cavemen] make this stuff? Going back to Altamira [palaeolithic caves in Spain]? Why was he painting bison images inside a cave? I suppose it served a function of the church as a didactic element for an illiterate population, but then later on, it became something else. It became a commodity once the middle class emerged. Well, it's always had a decorative aspect to it. I mean people have had it in their homes. Look at the Pompeian murals in the homes in Pompeii, they're beautiful paintings. So there has always been this desire to have something to remind us of something or to stimulate us in some way, whether it's a painting of a woman playing a lyre, or it's maybe a canine Mosaic at the threshold of a door. It had some function in the home or in the culture. What is it now? Is it a political vehicle? Is it? If it is, I don't think it's very efficient. I think there're other media that are better suited for politics. I'm thinking of video and film, obviously, and radio. Those are much more efficient media. I think when you're dealing art, you're already preaching to the choir. It's a single object and people that want to look are just that, they want to look.

I know that a lot of art now is about gender politics and has been, and social issues which is all well and good, and that's fine, but that's not the total, I think, spectrum of what it's about. Well, it has a couple of functions. It has a function for the maker. A person who is driven to spend their time and energy doing something must believe in it, whether they want recognition for it, money from it, or if it's a cathartic experience to do it, whatever their motivation that is valid for them. That's the artist's motivator. Once the object is made and it's out there, it's quite removed from the artist. It really exists as something else.

[END SESSION #3, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION #3, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PK: Continuing this third session of interview with Michael C. McMillen. This is Tape 2, Side B, and we're getting into pretty deep water here, talking about contemporary art and certain fashions or tendencies, and then your relationship to some of them in terms of your work.

MM: Let's flash back about 50 years to kind of the rise of Abstract Expressionism and how it was basically supported by these influential critics. And as you were saying, we look at it now and wonder how could that be? Perhaps by the same token, certain types of art today are being supported by influential critics and you see them in the magazines and so forth, and certainly, they do exist, but again, that's not all there is to the art world, and that's not the only art that's being produced. I'm not talking about the kind of work you see in American Artist either, the watercolor painting. That's another part of the forks, too. So what you see in the media is, obviously, filtered through someone's filter and that gets into the whole realm of best interests and favorites, and all those things to which the human soul is prone to. I accept that, and it's frustrating as hell at times, but that's the nature of the beast right now. So I think you got to keep on working and do what you believe in for yourself and, who knows, maybe history will remember you, maybe they won't; "No guarantees."

PK: I think you described the situation of the art world quite accurately, but you seem to have navigated it pretty well. I'm not sure if that was by strategy or by coincidence or some good fortune, but why don't you give a quick overview of your career and moments that maybe made a difference.

MM: Sure. I've been very fortunate. I'd be the first to say that. Over the years, I've received support for my work from different places. The piece I did for my M.F.A. exhibition was the Traveling Mystery Museum which was my first installation on a big scale, and it was done intentionally off campus. I rented a store front in Venice for about two weeks. The reason I did that was because I wanted to get away from the institution. I wanted to put art out on the street where people could interact with it and see it and where it could be both art and non-art at the same time. The duality of that intrigued me. It was interesting. People who saw it remember that experience for years afterwards, because at that time, it was unique. This was way before the Museum of Jurassic Technology was ever dreamed of. It was seen here and in San Francisco.

PK: What year was that?

MM: 1973. And it's been put away all these many years. Some day it might resurface. You never know. But being an artist is two things. You accumulate experience and time, and if you have something that's interesting,

you have to be persistent. That's very important. There's nothing instant about it. It's a way of life, actually, where you choose to spend your life doing this activity called making art. It can be maddening at times and frustrating and not always rewarding, frequently not rewarding. But you do it because you believe in it and you do it as a passion that drives you, and it sustains you during those lean times. You also have another job, as I've had many other jobs. Oh, there was something -- an artist, Walter Gabrielson, did a lecture series at the UCLA Extension in 1974 or 5 called "The Ironic L.A. Artist." It was a lecture series he did, and it was wonderful. It's legendary and you should definitely interview Walter at some point. That's the first time he introduced Terry Allen to the L.A. art scene. Terry Allen and Ed Ruscha was there, and Scott Greiger, and Karen Carson. This thing went on for many weeks, and Walter, who had been one of my teachers out at Northridge, asked me if I would do a presentation. I said, "Sure, you bet." I mean, no one knew who I was. I didn't realize at the time what an opportunity this was. It was only looking back did I realize how it let people know that I was here. Once that happened, then I was contacted by other people and other artists and there was this interaction. I had shown some work at Space Gallery with Ed Lau and Betty Asher bought one of my little works or had recommended to someone else that they should buy some of these pieces. At the time, she was working at the County Museum [LACMA] and some collector had bought some of my earlier sculptures. They're called Secret Sculptures. They're all built in miniature crates and the crates were sealed up. You couldn't get inside of them, but they had something in them. It was called Secret Sculpture #1, #2, #3 and this collector bought them, and that's how I met Betty.

Around '75, I was asked by a guy named Michael Smith who used to run the art galleries out at Baxter [Art Gallery, Cal Tech], really nice guy. He taught English out there, but he ran the gallery and he had invited myself and Carl Cheng to do a two-person show out at Baxter, and that's how I met Carl Cheng who has been a longtime friend now for many years. Carl mentioned to me that Betty Turnbull at the old Newport Harbor Art Museum had asked him to be in an exhibition that she was doing called Sounds: [Audio Visual Environments by Four L.A. Artists, 1975-1976]. It was installation works. She was putting a show together, and I heard about this and I said, "Gee, this is interesting." This is very unlike me, but I actually called her up and said, "Listen, I've got something that might work just fine for you." And so, she said, "Yeah, what is it?" I described the artist studio, and at the time, I didn't have a studio. I worked out of my bedroom, literally, in the house, out in my old garage. There was a certain vanity about one's studio. A lot of artists put a lot of time into their studio. Well I never had one, so I made a miniature studio. It was four feet long and about a foot and a half wide. It was a beautiful, old building, looked like a store front. It had a cleaners and a restaurant on the ground floors, and upstairs were the apartments. The cleaners was closed down and it was an artist's studio because you could tell because the windows were frosted and there was a stretcher bar against the windows, and in the back of it was like a workshop. You could hear them talking and pounding and stuff, and so I told her about this piece and she said, "I love it; let's do it." So she included me in this exhibition. There was Michael Brewster, Eric Orr, Carl Cheng, and myself, and the show was called Sounds: Installations by Four Los Angeles Artists, something like that. I think it was called Sounds because all the pieces had sounds in them. That was the commonality of these installations. And it was great! It was such a neat time. I think it was the first museum show I was ever in.

I wanted to get away from the idea of dollhouse. This is serious art. This is not a dollhouse. This is art. So I had them build me a platform that raised the miniature buildings. It was built on one inch to a foot scale so that if you were the same size as the building, you'd be six inches tall. I raised the building up on a base to your eye level at six inches so that you felt like you were in a scale walking around this building. I had them paint the base black and the walls black, and the only light was coming from the building itself. There's a little key light on it; otherwise, it was illuminated from within. It had signs, and the sound of the people having conversation about philosophy in life and everything. I wanted to transport the viewer out of their normal sense, so I actually made a miniature door about four feet high, all handmade, even made the doorknobs on a lathe so that when you went into it -- you couldn't do this now because of the handicap access requirements, but at the time, none of us were aware of that -- and so I made this door that you had to bend down, open, and kind of squeeze through. Everyone had to go through it, old ladies, gentlemen, children, so that this door was a precursor to what was coming. They didn't know it, so they went through a baffle and came into this room and there it was, a miracle. Floating in this black void was this artist studio and that was the piece. It was wonderful! It took you right out of there. You didn't know where you were. It played your sense of scale, personal size, your space. It really did things to your head.

PK: Where is this piece?

MM: It's in Glasgow [Gallery of Modern Art, Scotland] now. It's part of Inner City.

PK: So would you say that this was the first fully realized statement of something that you've investigated has been very important in other of your works?

MM: There was a piece prior to this that I built that was a miniature room that you saw through a security lens. That's actually how Mike's Pool Hall came about, too. I needed to create these environments, but I didn't have any money, so I made them as miniatures, room interiors that would be seen through a locked door, through a

security lens, that would subvert your sense of perspective and, hence, if it was done right, you wouldn't know. You would think it was a real space. You know who saw it? Maurice Tuckman saw it. And he asked me, he said, "Hey, I'd like to show that at LACMA the following year." I said, "You bet." This was amazing. I mean here I was just starting out of art school and these opportunities were there, and so knowing I had this much time, what did I do? I built four more buildings. I thought I should expand the idea, and that's how Inner City came about. I spent nine months working by myself building four more buildings. They were highly detailed, and that piece is the one that's today in -- at the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art in Scotland.

PK: Wow!

MM: But it was built between 1975 and '77, and once it was shown at LACMA, a curator from Whitney [Museum of American Art] saw it and it was shown at the Whitney the following year, which is my first New York museum experience. It was great! I wish there'd been some follow-through.

PK: Did it get favorable notice?

MM: Yeah, it did; it did. People were transfixed by it. It was done at a time before Hollywood was so commercialized and exposed and exploited the way it is now, so they didn't see that and think about movie special effects. That wasn't even an issue. They saw it and were intrigued at the change in scale, and yet the detail that allowed them to believe it, because that's really -- isn't that what art is about is kind of suspending your disbelief for a while so that you can accept it and believe it.

PK: A window onto nature deep space. That's all the same thing.

MM: So basically, that's what I wanted to do and I did it. I mean I never went to architecture school, but this is all self-taught, basically, and this let me investigate my ideas of scale and the old idea of transporting. I'm always wanting to transport the viewer to someplace else. One of my early installations was like a spaceship I built that you got inside, and when you're in there, past the portholes, stars would fly by. This was all done before computer games, way before that all done mechanically with sound and it was like another world. I guess I'm trying to escape a lot.

PK: So this really did establish a direction for the work that you feel has remained pretty consistent.

MM: I move around. I do paintings and pieces like that, but it really was a nuclei; a turning point for me.

PK: Well did it get picked up on? You certainly got the early attention of some influential people.

MM: At that time, Betty [Asher] was leaving her job at the County Museum. They were having some layoffs in the early '70s, and she asked me if she could represent me. I said, "Sure," so I'd left Space Gallery at that time. At the time she was just dealing privately from her apartment over in Beverly Hills. Then later when she started the gallery [Asher/Faure Gallery] and I just kind of tagged along. Years later when Betty retired from the gallery, I felt that was when I would leave the gallery also. So she was my main connection with the gallery.

PK: How many years were you with her?

MM: Eight years, something like that. She retired and Patty [Faure] kept it going for a number of years after that. Then she closed it and opened it at Bergamot [Station] as the Patricia Faure Gallery. As a side note, Peter Gould who I knew at UCLA when he was teaching there and I was a graduate student had opened his gallery, LA Louver, in Venice, and had asked me if I would be interested. What had happened is Betty had asked me two weeks earlier and I had said yes, so out of loyalty to Betty, I had to decline his offer, and years later, I came back and I said, "Peter, are you still interested?" So there we go. So we resumed after a hiatus of like 15 years or whatever.

PK: So when was it that you went with LA Louver?

MM: You know, I'm awful with dates. I have to look it up. I can't remember exactly when I started showing with Peter. It's been, I guess, close to 10 years maybe. What does it say in the biography here? Let's see. I'm not sure. It would be after that, maybe ten year or so, I'm not sure exactly. I think it was like '86 was when I left, so maybe like 10, 11 years ago, something like that. Things always seemed to work out, though. And there was a time -- I've been very fortunate. I was in the Corcoran [Gallery of Art, Washington, DC] Biennial [38th Annual Exhibition of American Painting, 1983] one year, oddly enough for painting. The funny thing is, is that people don't think of me as a painter, mainly because I don't do a lot of paintings, but every so often, I do. I love painting! I cycle off of different media as I need to, and I don't refer to myself as a sculptor, but I use the word "visual artist." I prefer that, because that leaves the medium wide open because I've got ideas for film and video, things I haven't had the time yet to really fully explore, probably never will, but I want to be able to have that option open to kind of do that.

PK: So some people have commented, and I don't know if this is true, that you're maybe as well known or maybe even better known in certain foreign circles. Have you gotten some pretty good support abroad?

MM: It's possible. It's funny. I'm really interested in doing more work in Europe.

PK: Do you have contacts there? I mean have you shown there?

MM: I've not shown there yet, oddly enough. I mean I've been in a couple of group shows, and again, I've had these opportunities that have never quite worked out for some reason.

PK: Maybe you don't network --

MM: I know I don't do that enough. I'm seeing now, naive and late in life as I am, that that's how it gets done, apparently. So I've actually started this year, Paul, of writing more and more letters that I ever have in my life. I figure at some point, there'll be something that will come of it. There is interest in England in doing some projects and possibly in France. I would love to address a European audience just because I think from my shows in New York and the Europeans I've met and I have heard from, they have generally been fascinated by the work, and I think in a lot of ways, they see it in ways that Americans probably wouldn't see it.

PK: So is it -- you showed -- your New York shows were with Patricia Hamilton [Gallery], right?

MM: I did a show at the Whitney. There was a series of Exxon sponsors for a number of years at the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum] and I was in a couple of shows at the Guggenheim. In fact, they have a couple of my pieces in their collection, but commercially, I have shown for Patricia Faure twice in New York and then she closed her gallery, so I don't have a gallery right now in New York and I'm thinking I should get back and take care of that, try to find another venue.

PK: You mean Patricia Hamilton?

MM: No. She's not active there right now. She's closed her gallery. She deals privately. She sets up shows for people, almost like a broker. I need a gallery there now so I can maintain a presence. I'm making inquiries, phone calls and letters. It's tough because people forget you. My last show in New York was in '88. That's about 10 years ago.

PK: But on the other hand, they might see this as fresh and exciting.

MM: They might, so I think I should go back and maybe pound the sidewalk or at least write some letters, but it's tough. I've been fortunate over the years. I've received a couple of NEA grants over the years and some other foundation grants.

PK: I don't know if we covered this topic, but it certainly comes up naturally at this point, that if you had been in New York, that you would have stayed more visible, and in a quite natural way, you would have been supposedly interacting with those who would be in a position to be helpful and maybe even have more contact with dealers?

MM: I think probably so. I mean I hate to admit it, but I think the geography of New York is that it's very close and it's real easy to make contacts, whereas here, people come and go through L.A. all the time and you never hear about them. When I was living in Australia, I had more contact with European curators than I ever had in Los Angeles. Go figure.

PK: Maybe the Getty, even though it's not contemporary, will change that to a certain degree.

MM: Oh, I hope so.

PK: It's going to change a lot.

MM: I guess it will. I guess it will have a big impact, but one nice thing about L.A. is that you can work here in privacy, but that also works against you because you can get forgotten here, too. I think in New York, it's hard to be left alone. It's hard to have privacy whereas here, you can have it.

PK: But you don't want to be forgotten.

MM: No, of course not.

PK: And you want the dealers to be thinking about you.

MM: I mean I have never once been even telephoned by any curators from the Whitney since that show, and the

show was real popular. A lot of the people that were then have since left. I'm sure that has an influence.

PK: Maybe Patterson Simms was there.

MM: He was there. Patterson was there, and who else was there? Richard, what was his last name, Richard Marshall. I don't know where he is now, but these people move around, and a lot of these people either don't follow up or I don't follow up with them and you get lost in the shuffle, because what I'm seeing now is a whole new generation of very aggressive, younger artists who go out there and they really work the system. I mean they are, to use a word, "careerists." They're really hustling, I mean with a capital "H". And I guess if you don't do that, you do get overlooked. As my granny used to say, "The squeaky hinge gets the oil."

PK: There ought to be a seminar in art schools and other regional centers here devoted to a study of local artists like Ed Ruscha, who is international, but completely identified, more than anybody else, with Los Angeles and it has served him.

MM: Oh yeah. That's my Oklahoma.

PK: Oh yeah, he's an Oklahoman, too. So obviously, there are ways to make yourself present.

MM: I think so. And when you look at some of the work that's being produced, I know there's more to it than just being a good artist. I mean a lot of it has to do with P.[ublic]R.[elations] Maybe Jeff Koons is right, although I hate to admit it. He seems to make it work.

PK: Being an entrepreneur, he's right about that.

MM: It's frustrating when you see certain strategies being rewarded where maybe the work doesn't justify it.

PK: I don't see how an individual could really be happy with himself or herself if the attention starts to go to strategies and to this careerist because you're crazy to choose to be an artist as a business.

MM: Oh, yeah, no. You'd be better off being a dealer or something. Oh, yeah, no, that is not a good career choice if you want to get rich.

PK: So there's got to be something else.

MM: Maybe it's ego-gratification or something. I'm sure we all do it for that purpose anyway, but it's odd. I don't understand it. Also, I think at one point, too, a whole new younger generation of critics come in and they're really aware of zeitgeist [the spirit of age] in their group, and the older artists tend to get forgotten as their critics retire and do other things or stop paying attention. So there's a factor of aging that I think is to be considered, too. As a middle-aged artist, you kind of get put on a shelf for the young ones.

PK: Well I suppose, but there are a lot of us who think, and maybe -- and I don't think it's just because we're creatures of the '60s or '70s ourselves, but that there really was a time when some extraordinary work was being done and the ideas. There was a time when it was just jumping with ideas.

MM: I remember. It was scintillating.

END OF INTERVIEW

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